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IN THE APRIL 1956 ISSUE

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MANUSCRIPTS WE NEVER FINISHED READING:

It was a beautiful morning. The sun bathed the countryside with its effulgent radiance, pointing up the brilliance of the resplendent foliage of cottonwoods, elms, oaks, and maples. Above the low hills to the north a soft blue haze seemed to ebb and flow to the music of Nature's woodwinds . . .

Ra-por-snzar, ruler of Ubrainistiana, the most powerful country in all Blughpartia, stepped into his private spaceship and set its controls for the planet of Glymphmania. He was quite aware that the faithless queen Lolapostroad . . .

Professor Bryan let his hands rest on the lectern while his eyes moved slowly across the ranks of assembled students. "The principle of galactic expansion," he began, "is based primarily on the remarkable antipathy between . . ."

Fred threw a quick punch which caught Bill squarely in the mouth. He fell back and tried to draw his blaster, but Fred was already locking his fingers about Bill's wrist, twisting it cruelly. The two men stood face to face, breathing heavily, their faces twisted masks of hatred. Suddenly Fred thrust a foot behind Bill's legs and threw his entire weight against . . .

(Concluded on page 130)

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BLACK BLOCKADE

The Adventurer's short-sword was now at Premier Danvers' neck.

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

"If it please the Court," Hayden said. "I want to be heard!"

BLACK BLOCKADE

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

The Adventurers Club was made up of the bravest men in the galaxy, all of whom were willing to take on any job, however dangerous—if you could pay their price. April van Dane had a job for them, all right; what she didn't have was money. That's why her plea for help drew a big laugh . . . except from the one man who put gallantry above gold!

THE girl advanced timidly toward the seemingly solid wall to which she had been directed. She glanced back along the narrow street. Her apprehension was understandable because this was the worst neighborhood in the whole Martian Interchange. On her left lay the great mile-square Teleport from which Premier Danvers controlled the known universe. To the north was the Federation Space Port from whence blasted the big black ships that backed Danvers' reign. And around and about prowled the desperate and the lawless who gave scant consideration to life or death.

Yet the girl could not have been upon safer ground because none but the insane would molest a person knocking on the door of the Adventurers Club. The arm of this organization was as long as its memory and it protected its clients and prospective clients as a matter of policy.

The girl raised a small fist and knocked on the wall, wondering what lay beyond, what would happen next. Almost immediately a crack appeared in the wall, a door opened, a cold-eyed young man made polite inquiry. "Yes, Miss?"

"I have a mission to sell."

"Come in."

She entered and the panel closed behind her. The young man led her down a dirty, neglected passage to a second closed door. He opened it and motioned her inside and as she entered she caught her breath at the contrast. Magnificent was the word for this room in which she found herself. Rich gold-washed draperies covered the walls. The chairs were of precious Venusian garwood polished to glittering splendor and inlaid with burnished silver and semi-precious stones. The rugs were made from the in-

destructible fur of the Plutonian ice bear, each strand of hair shining with the deathless luminescence that made that creature unique in the universe.

"This way," the young attendant said. "I think you can get bids immediately. There are quite a number of members present . . ."

Mace Hayden lounged at a table in the auction room of the Adventurers Club. He was a Terran, six and a half feet tall, muscled in perfect proportion, cat-quick and bull-strong. His blond good looks were in marked contrast to the pair with which he was drinking, Tack Largo the small vicious dandified Venusian, and Pandak the huge Uranian bruiser. But regardless of the physical contrast, these three had several things in common. They were members of the Adventurers Club which made them freebooters for hire. The club was the headquarters where they came to bid against each other for desperate projects. It was run after the manner of that ancient group, Lloyds of London. The client presented himself upon a raised platform and his mission was stated. The members present weighed the odds, calculated the risk, and made their bids. And rarely indeed did a client go away without having struck a bargain.

Mace was in a fine mood this day. He had been idle for a week, had gambled away his last fee, and had drunk just enough to generate a feeling of contented well-being.

But the necessity of returning to work had intruded. Hence his presence in the auction room. He yawned and set down his flagon. "Things are dull today."

"It's the blockade," Tack Largo purred. "Everyone is waiting to see what will happen."

"They will start dying there shortly," Pandak said. "A month and it will be over. Then things will return to normal."

None of the three doubted that Premier Danvers would succeed with his blockade. After all, his setup was foolproof. He controlled the Teleport, the channel through which all supplies were routed to the planetary members of the Federation. His black ships could lay a blockade around even distant Neptune so that not a breadcrust could be pushed through. Therefore, what chance did a small, ten-thousand-soul community on Luna have to

survive Danvers' wrath? Even surrender was out of the question now because Danvers' deadline for capitulation had passed and Danvers had stated with sadness and regret that the community must be annihilated "as an example to others who might be tempted to move against the common good."

Mace yawned again as a fat man was escorted to the platform. The fat man had been muscled off his share of a Ganymedian oil field by an unscrupulous partner and he wanted the partner eliminated.

Perhaps it had been the other way around but that did not matter. Mace, not interested in projects of this nature, listened while a shabby looking member of the club took the mission for seven hundred in gold.

After the fat man left, Mace said, "What does Danvers think he can gain by starving ten thousand people?"

Tack Largo laughed. "A dictator must show ruthlessness at times in order to keep his power absolute."

"I think he's a sadist. I think he enjoys sitting in his office visualizing the agony."

"Maybe," Pandak said, matching Mace's previous yawn, "but every man to his specialty, I say. Danvers lets us alone so I won't interfere with him."

"Unless the price is right," Tack Largo smiled.

"Of course. That would be different. Everything hinges on the price."

Largo eyed the big Uranian and there was friendly banter in his voice. "Pandak—how much would you charge to fly to heaven and yank the gatekeeper off his perch?"

Pandak considered solemnly. "I don't know, offhand. But the mission would cost plenty, I'll tell you that."

Largo laughed in delight and Mace said, "I think Danvers leaves us alone because he's afraid of us."

"With all those ships?" Pandak asked.

"A million ships wouldn't necessarily guard a man from a sharp knife in the ribs."

Largo shrugged, started to speak, then whistled softly. "Mercy for a swine! Do you see what I see?"

They did. The attendant was escorting a slim dark-haired girl to the platform. As she moved along with her head held high, every member present reacted to her—those of the higher order with admiration, those of more bru-

tal instincts with plain lust.

"Mercy for a murderer!" Largo said. "That child needs a protector."

"For a price, of course," Pandak growled.

"Certainly. I hope she is wealthy."

The attendant raised his hand for silence in order to outline the mission. "Gentlemen, the client is April van Dane. Her father is Dane van Dane, the leader of the Dutch colony in Luna against which Premier Danvers has established a disciplinary blockade."

Largo's eyes brightened. "But those squatters are penniless. I wonder where she got enough money to hire an Adventurer?"

"The client wishes," the attendant went on, "to engage blockade runners. She states that her people are starving, that some have already died, that the situation is desperate."

"An understatement if I ever heard one," Pandak murmured.

The attendant raised his hand. "The mission has been stated. Let the bidding begin."

Three things were known immediately by the members —that the mission was suicidal, that the price would be staggering, but that there would be bids.

"Seven million gold," a voice called.

"I have seven million gold," the attendant acknowledged.

"Four million platinum."

"Three and a half million diamond."

"Eight million silver."

Mace Hayden was watching the girl closely. He saw the tightness in her beautiful face and noted the sudden pallor at sound of the first bid. So he was less surprised than the rest when she suddenly threw up her arms and called out, "Stop this! Stop this barter in human misery! I have no money. I and my people are penniless."

The attendant's jaw dropped. "But, Madam. That's completely absurd. If you are without funds why did you come here?"

The girl turned from him to address the members. "I came to make a plea for my people—to appeal to your compassion, your inherent humanity!"

As she paused, a rumble of quiet laughter went through the room. It was the members' comment upon the naiveté in her words.

At sound of it, her nostrils flared, her cheeks brightened,

her lips twisted with contempt and Mace thought he had never before seen a girl so completely and defiantly beautiful.

"I came to tell you of suffering such as you have never seen," April van Dane went on. "Over there in the Lunar Caves little children are looking at their parents with dying eyes, not understanding what has happened. That beast, Danvers, has cut off our teleport channel until not even a drop of milk for a dying baby comes through. My mother died last night. My younger sister perished three days ago. The helpless are suffering and for what reason? Because Danvers will not even let my father capitulate. He has doomed us as an example to others who might dare claim their just rights in the future. He has done this terrible thing and you sit here and talk of money! How low can a human being sink?"

"Fiery little wench, isn't she?" Largo smiled.

"Too bad she's penniless," Mace growled.

The attendant had recovered from his surprise now. He was not completely out of his depth because there had been other tricksters in the club before and would probably be again. It was merely a matter of throwing them out.

The attendant reached sternly for April van Dane. But she twisted away with a lithe movement and ran down among the tables where the members were sitting. By chance, she stopped beside Mace's table and turned like a leopardess at bay. "You soulless animals!" she cried. "Look at me and remember. May I haunt and torture you in your dreams. Let this be a symbol of my contempt!"

With that she turned and laid a stinging slap across the cheek of Mace Hayden.

"And now I cannot return to my people so I die here in your filthy hall as another symbol for your rotten memories. Never forget that you could have helped us and you did not!"

With that, April van Dane snatched a dagger from her bodice and raised it high.

Tack Largo reacted first, but not with physical action, merely with a pained remonstrance. "Oh, my dear! Not on our nice clean carpet!"

Mace sprang as the point of the blade touched April van Dane's breast. He snatched it back, holding her wrist firmly. She screamed at him and writhed with surprising

strength. Not enough to free herself, of course, but enough to bring *bravos* from the delighted members. "I'll take Hayden," one shouted. "I'll take the girl and give odds," another called.

Mace Hayden reddened with embarrassment. "I'll get her out of here," he muttered and started for the door, drawing the girl along in his wake.

Cold laughter followed him, shut off only by the door as it closed behind him. In the narrow street outside, April van Dane was still struggling desperately in his grasp. He seized her by the shoulders, pressed her against the brick wall, and said, "Stand still, you little war cat! Stand *still!*"

Whereupon her struggles ceased, her shoulders went limp, and a storm of tears erupted on Mace's breast.

This was the one thing that could possibly have caused him even worse frustration. He did not know what to do. He could not let go and allow her to fall to the pavement. So he held her until the storm subsided. Then he raised her face and frowned in perplexity. "Are things really as bad on Luna as you said in there?"

"Of course they are," she replied wearily. "You know that without asking."

That was true. He'd only been seeking something to say. His frown deepened. "Haven't you people any money at all?"

"We could hardly raise enough to pay for the food Danvers teleported to us. That was why he wanted us to get out—to make room for a richer colony."

They began walking slowly up the dark street, April's slim shoulders sagging in weary defeat. Mace said, "I haven't been following the affair very closely. On what grounds does Danvers base the eviction. It would, of course, be legal."

"Oh, certainly," she replied with bitterness. "He always twists a legal cover around his cruelties. Even starving us to death is legal."

"But the eviction."

"Centuries ago, before space travel, some group of juveniles called a *science fiction* club sold all the craters on Luna for a nickel each—a trifling sum in that era. It was a joke of some sort, but the club issued a deed to each so-called owner. Danvers dug up records of these sales and had his Supreme Court declare them legal and binding. Then, because of the fact that

none of the owners willed the craters to heirs of record, Danvers said the moon reverts to the Federation—the established government—and as the head of the government he can evict us from our section."

"And you refused to leave."

"Yes. Then he set a deadline of which we were not even notified. When we were not out by that time, he evoked the emergency clause in the Constitution which gives him absolute power to proceed as he wishes, any act he commits containing its own justification."

"He obviously enjoys his acts of cruelty," Mace said. He turned on April suddenly. "Haven't you people got anything of value at all?"

Her anger flared anew. "How can you stand and talk of that when children are starving?"

"Because I'm a member of the Adventurers Club and we have a code. No service without payment. It has to be enforced or one charity case would lead to another until the organization would fall apart."

Her shoulders had sagged again. "Oh, I suppose it doesn't make any difference. None of you could succeed in getting food to Luna anyhow. No one in the universe is capable of breaking the Federation blockade."

"How did you get to Mars?"

"I stowed away on a passenger ship that stopped at the Lunar Station for minor repairs. Even that was a thousand-to-one shot. I got through by sheer chance but I won't even try to go back. It would be useless."

"Just what is it you plan to do?"

"Kill myself, of course," she said simply. "I couldn't live while all my people die. I wouldn't even take a bite of food while they starve."

Mace opened his mouth to reply. Then he stopped, his eyes narrowed in sudden thought. "Listen," he said suddenly, "you aren't impoverished at all. There's something you can give in payment."

April looked at him in frank disbelief. "What?"

"You can give us the Martian Interchange."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Not at all," Mace said happily. "That's all I ask—a deeding over of the Martian Interchange."

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand. That's absurd. And you just

said, *us*. Do you mean the whole Adventurers Club?"

"No, just three of us. Come on back to the club. You can write out the deed—"

As he spoke April van Dane sagged against him. Her eyes closed. She slipped to the ground. He lifted her instantly and looked into her face. He remembered what she had said: *I wouldn't even take a bite of food while they starve.*

"Why, she's weak from hunger," he muttered. As he hurried back to the Adventurers Club a cold rage such as he had never before felt, welled up within him . . .

"This is the damndest thing I ever heard of," Tack Largo said. He was rereading the deed April had signed and passing a languid hand through the shining black hair he was so proud of. "It's no more legal than stealing a man's wallet."

"Of course it isn't," Mace said. He had already explained his plan to Largo and the huge, lethargic Pandak. "Well," he asked impatiently, "do we join forces and go after the biggest stake of our careers?"

"I doubt if we'll be alive to collect it," Pandak grunted.

"Since when has a minor point like that bothered you, Pandak?" Largo spoke with a touch of the snobbishness he felt for the inferior Uranian. This did not escape the latter, but he was very slow to anger and he only made the mental note that someday he would get around to killing the Venusian aristocrat.

Pandak said, "It's certainly a stake worth shooting for."

"Then it's agreed," Mace said. "First, of course, we have to earn this deed by getting food through to the Lunar colony. Any suggestions?"

Largo grimaced in frank distaste. "It just occurred to me that lack of suitable remuneration in this matter has saved members of the club a lot of embarrassment."

"How so?" Mace asked.

"Since no interested party had enough money, no member has been forced to take on an impossible job." He glanced quickly at Mace from under lashes any female would have envied. "It *is* impossible you know."

Mace shrugged. "The impossible has been done before." He glanced at the lounge where April lay sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. They had practically forced

her to eat, and a little color had come back into her cheeks.

"Suppose I take her to my hotel," Largo said casually. "She'll be safe there. Then I—"

"Will she?" Mace asked sharply. Largo was the soul of surprised innocence as Mace went on. "Listen, my bucko. That girl is now a client. I think you know what happens to a member who in any manner cheats, abuses or molests a client?"

The dapper Venusian shuddered slightly in spite of himself. "Oh, that's right. She *is* a client now, isn't she? On rather peculiar terms, but—"

"She'll be perfectly safe here. Now I suggest we start reconnaissance."

"Certainly. Where do you think we should start?"

"In the Teleport—where else? That's where the flow of Lunar food was stopped."

"Mercy for a criminal! So it was." There was condescension and mockery in Largo's voice but Mace paid no attention. He had grown used to it through previous contact.

"Let's go then," Pandak said, and led the way out of the club and into the street...

Premier Danvers looked up from his desk as the attendant from the Adventurers Club entered the office. The attendant waited respectfully.

"Well?" Danvers snapped.

"It has happened, sir. The thing you told me to watch for. I came immediately to tell you."

"An attempt to break the Lunar blockade?"

"Yes, Sire."

"How many members are involved?"

"Three, Sire. Their names are Mace Hayden, a Terran who—"

"I know—I know!" Danvers snapped impatiently.

"Tack Largo, a Venusian and an Uranian named Pandak."

Even in the safety of his office, Premier Danvers' heart fluttered at the sound of Mace Hayden's name. Because he was a rank physical coward, he trembled even though he knew that smashing the blockade was impossible and that the three would surely die in their attempt.

Danvers had achieved his position because of an animal cunning and a taste for treachery and cruelty as black as Sodom's sins. He enjoyed cruelty to the extreme and therefore the obscene and bestial tortures that went on in his prison caves were not at all distressing to him.

But these were hidden, skulking deeds, with never a word to the people and never a trace of the unfortunate victims remaining to confound him.

In the broad, public sense, Danvers was very timid, careful that his acts of open cruelty and tyranny were always cloaked in legality. He reasoned that if revolt ever got the supper hand the complete legality of his public acts might save his life.

To support this sham, he appointed a Supreme Court—seven puppets who passed solemnly on Danvers' acts of state. At times, in order to impress the masses, Danvers ordered the Court to reverse him on some inconsequential act and would stand by their reversal with a great public show of righteousness which he felt—if trouble ever came—would stand him in good stead.

The attendant, whose ear had indeed been keen, told Danvers all that had happened at the Adventurers Club. The Premier was badly shaken. The Adventurers was a group with which he had always hoped to avoid trouble for the simple reason that he was deathly afraid of them. In days gone by, he had actually made friendly overtures to them and had been contemptuously rebuffed because these were free-hearted men who acknowledged no master and would fight to the death to protect their own brand of villainy.

So an unofficial truce had sprung up between the Adventurers and the official government of the Federation which was, in a word, Danvers. The two evil forces did not encroach upon each other's sphere of activity.

But now Danvers knew he had to make a move of some sort. This defiance of his blockade was too arrogant to be ignored. There were two direction in which he could proceed with his countermove and his keen mind swiftly appraised both. First, he could move openly against the Adventurers as a group. But his fear of them caused him speedily to shelve this idea.

The other plan was far safer and surer of success. He would engage the three trouble-makers individually. And the girl also. He would cause them to vanish into his dark caves and there would follow a few pleasant days of watching his torturers at their grisly work. Then if by some long chance there was

ever an inquiry from the Adventurers Club, he would piously deny all knowledge of the men or the girl. But there would be no inquiry, because each member faced his own peril and went his own dark way into success or failure upon each mission he purchased. If he did not return within a reasonable time, a plaque was put on the wall of the Hero's Room at the club —a toast was drunk by the members present—and the unfortunate one forgotten.

Danvers, deep in his own thoughts, realized the attendant was still prattling on. Having the entire picture, Danvers scowled and snapped, "Cease your babbling. Return to the club and keep your eyes and ears open."

The attendant hesitated, "But my money, Sire."

"Oh, yes, your money!" Danvers took a small plastic bag from his drawer and tossed it to the traitor. The latter weighed it in his hand and was loathe to leave. "It—it is very light, Sire—"

Danver half-rose from his desk as his evil face darkened. "Perhaps you would like to add to it in the caves downstairs. We have some very interesting metal down there."

The attendant's face went white. He placed the bag on the desk and spoke through trembling lips. "Oh, Sire. You misunderstand me. I wanted the money only to serve you better—not for my own pleasure. It is my desire to bring you information of traitors through loyalty to your greatness—not from personal gain."

Danvers laughed. "That's better. Now get out of my sight." As the attendant backed out, Danvers sneered at him with contempt and put the plastic bag back into the drawer . . .

Mace Hayden, Tack Largo, and Pandak, the Uranian, walked through the bright Martian morning. Around them the Martian Interchange, that vast, sprawling settlement from which Danvers controlled the universe, was alive with activity.

Tack Largo, wearing his perpetual cynical smile spoke banteringly. "Well, my comrades, how does it feel to walk through your own city? To know that you own a third of all you can see?"

The taciturn Uranian grunted. "It is one thing to own and quite another to take possession."

"Let's have an end to this joking and get a few things

straight," Mace Hayden said.

"What things?" the Venusian asked.

"First, who is going to command this mission? It would be fatal if we move off in three directions."

"It will be fatal regardless," Pandak said.

"Perhaps you would like to command, Mace Hayden?" Tack Largo observed. There was a hint of challenge in his tone.

"I suggest we vote."

"Very well—I vote for myself," Tack Largo replied.

"I vote for Mace," Pandak said.

"I vote for myself also," Mace said, "so that ends the matter."

Tack Largo bowed with an amused laugh. "So it does. What orders, Commander?"

"I think, first of all, we must proceed on the theory that Danvers knows of our intentions and will attempt to thwart them."

"That's absurd. How could he know?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Then why proceed on such a basis?"

"Because I prefer to."

"And why do you prefer to?"

"Because we've been followed for the last ten minutes by six men. They wear the official caps of the Federation Security Police. The Security Police answer only to Danvers. Therefore he must know of our plans.

"And I suggest you get ready to fight," he added, "because we've walked into a trap."

As they turned to appraise the situation, Tack Largo said, "You saw them earlier. You deliberately led us into this trap." His tone was not now cynical.

"Certainly I did," Mace replied. "Are you afraid of a paltry half-dozen Security men?"

"Of course not. It's just that you've been rather inconsiderate—and, I might add, stupid."

"Stupid? Why do you think I came back into this pocket? In order that we may proceed without interruption. One of them should talk."

Pandak studied the six advancing men. They were big, in perfect condition, and each knew his job. "How do you analyze this situation, Mace?" the huge Uranian asked.

"That's not difficult. They carry short-swords, therefore it's an undercover arrest and we're slated for the pits without trial. If it were a legal arrest they would carry guns according to regulations."

"But guns would make too much noise?"

"Correct."

"Well analyzed, Terran," Tack Largo said, "and advantageously so, since it gives us a free hand to protect our lives."

"Correct again."

The three Adventurers stood silent now as the six guards advanced. Without consulting, the trio slipped into the correct tactic for the occasion. This was instinctive because they had fought all over the universe and fighting was primarily their business. They stood shoulder to shoulder, each with a hand hidden inside his tunic, gripping a short-sword.

The six advanced. They stopped however, some ten paces away, and seemed uncertain of themselves. Perhaps they had expected the Adventurers to lunge forward and seek a quick kill.

But the three wisely traded the value of uncertainty for the possibility of quickly reducing the ranks of their foe. They stood silent, unmoving, like statues.

The leader of the squad barked, "You're under arrest."

There was no response. He could have been talking to the wall. He glanced at his companions, then down at his short-sword as though to reassure himself that it had not melted away under the hot sun. The Adventurers neither moved nor spoke.

The leader advanced another step with his squad. "I said you're under arrest. Do you give up? Will you come quietly?"

There was no response. The leader took heart. "I think they're paralyzed with fear," one of the group whispered hoarsely.

This did not bring a smile even from the doughty Tack Largo. The half-dozen advanced with more confidence now, feeling that the reputation of the Adventurers for sublime courage was somewhat over-rated.

They were swiftly disenchanted of this when the three moved with the speed and precision of a single striking snake. Three blades flashed. Those of Mace and Tack Largo went home. Mace's adversary went down in silence but the man Tack Largo selected screamed in agony as the blade cut into his heart.

Tack snarled and lashed again. "Silence, you dog!" he growled. "Must you attract

gaping yokels as an audience to your death?"

The time taken for Tack Largo's sideplay seemed a doorway to disaster as two of the unoccupied guards hurled themselves on the Venusian.

The situation was further darkened by the fact that Pandak's sword had not found a fatal mark. Pandak was a huge and unwieldy fighter and would have preferred other tactics in the first place because his talent was that of the charging bull.

So Mace, after dispatching his own man, had turned to drive at the Security man who had moved under Pandak's guard and was even at that moment driving a blade into the flesh over the Uranian's huge heart.

Mace slashed out with a speed that blurred the bright steel of his sword. It ripped into the others throat bringing forth a crimson gush and stopping the other blade a scant inch from finishing Pandak.

This made the odds even but two of the remaining three had Tack Largo in sudden helplessness against the wall because the Venusian's foot had slipped on some gutter filth and spoiled an evading twist that he would normally have accomplished with ease.

As Pandak staggered back, Mace Hayden whirled and threw himself toward his fallen ally. With no time to bring his short-sword into play, he dropped it and took the head of one of the Security men in his two big hands and twisted. A gargling scream signaled the breaking of the man's neck.

Mace pushed him aside to reveal the fighting face of Tack Largo at the very moment he was driving his short-sword into the heart of the man above him. Largo shoved the corpse aside and came to his feet.

He did not thank Mace for saving his life. Among the Adventurers, thanks for such a thing was never given and never expected. Instead they turned as one to see that the huge Uranian had the sixth foe in his grasp and was fighting as he loved to fight—depending for success or failure on his massive strength.

Mace lunged forward. "Hold! Stop! Don't kill him. He's the last one!" And he seized the remaining man and tore him from Pandak's grasp.

The Security man gagged for breath as he slumped to

the pavement. Mace was over him instantly, lifting him like a doll. "Now," Mace snarled. "If you want your life, tell us who sent you—and why."

The man's eyes pleaded for a moment to find his breath. His expression showed how desperately he hoped his silence would not be interpreted as stubbornness because he did not want to die and knew that death was imminent.

"Talk!" Mace grated.

"The — the Premier — not our fault—we do as ordered."

"He sent you after us?"

"We were to kill you or take you to the caves."

"Ha," snorted Tack Largo with contempt. "It appears you will have to await another day."

"You will spare me, my lords?"

"We will spare you." Tack Largo glanced sardonically at Mace. "That is, if our noble commander so wills it."

Mace straightened. "Let him go. We got our information and things have worked well—so far."

But things had not worked at all well, as Mace was soon to learn. The Security man—knowing the Adventurers, with their strange mixture of integrity and deviltry, never went back on their word—reverted to type and pleasured himself with a little gloating. He grinned and said, "The other arm of our orders did not fail as this one did."

"What arm was that?"

"Another squad took the girl—that Lunar female from whom you bought the mission."

"So Danvers knows about that too," Tack Largo exclaimed.

"They got April van Dane!" Mace's voice was filled with self-recrimination and bitterness.

Not so with that of Tack Largo. His principal reaction was annoyance. He scowled at some filth he was daintily brushing from his sleeve and said, "Now how did that troublesome little wench get herself taken?"

The Security man grinned evilly. "We aren't as stupid as you seem to think."

"No," Tack Largo replied. "I actually felt that six of you would not be enough to take a single slip of a girl, but I was wrong."

The Security man's face darkened under the insult but his expression changed speedily to one of fright as Mace sent him sprawling with a single kick.

As the man got to his feet and went limping away, Pan-

dak looked after him thoughtfully. "He'll run straight to Danvers, you understand."

Mace doubled his fists and raised them slowly. "We've broken our own rule. We've allowed harm to come to a client while in her service."

This sobered even the carefree Tack Largo. His beautiful dark eyes brooded over the catastrophe and his tone was less contemptuous when he asked, "What do we do now, commander?"

Mace's brain was racing furiously. "We must split up. April van Dane will be in the caves. I must go in after her."

"It will certainly not help our mission to lose you also."

"The odds are long, but—"

"An understatement. There are no odds."

"Nevertheless, I must try. I know a secret entrance to the caves but it is on a thoroughfare that will be filled with people at this hour."

While Mace pondered the point, Tack Largo said, "Perhaps I could help you."

"How?"

"By creating a diversion. People can't look in two directions at once and I swear to you that they will be ogling me while you make your descent into the caves."

"Excellent. Then, after I've vanished, I want you to go to the club and find the traitor there. It could be only the attendant. As I remember, he loitered in the background while we made our deal. You must get a confession from him."

"There'll be no trouble on that score," Tack Largo said lightly.

"And I?" the huge Uranian asked.

"My ship lies at the North blast-range. I want you to fill her with supplies for the Lunar Colony."

Pandak's eyes widened along with those of the Venusian dandy. "Are you going to try and run Premier Danvers' blockade?"

"What other way is there to get the supplies through?"

They both shrugged.

"Wait twenty-four Terran hours," Mace said. "Then, if I have not reappeared, consider me a casualty and take my ship. Drive for the Lunar Colony and may the god of all adventurers smile on your mission."

"And yours too, Mace Hayden," Pandak said with fervor.

Tack Largo said nothing. So far as he was concerned, the whole mission was too absurd for comment. He would do his best, of course,

but he fully expected to die and that would be that.

""Let's get on with it," he suggested. "Or shall we all stop at the closest tavern for a bracer before undertaking the impossible?"

"We'd better get out of here at any rate," Pandak rumbled. "Danvers may send twelve after us if we linger."

"It's a point," Tack Largo said. "Goodbye, Uranian. You were an excellent drinking companion."

With that, they parted company, the huge Pandak hurrying off toward the North blast-range and Tack Largo following Mace with some curiosity as to their destination . . .

Half a Terran hour later, Mace touched Tack Largo's arm and pointed to what could have been a sewer drain. "There," Mace said. "I've got to get down that hole unobserved."

Tack Largo glanced along the street. There were perhaps fifty people in sight. "Give me two minutes," he said. "Then make your move."

He moved off up the street. After a hundred yards or so, he stopped and pensively regarded the passersby. He selected one, a big man from Terra who was walking along minding his own affairs.

Tack Largo waited until the Terran came abreast, then stepped close and snapped, "How dare you, sir!" and slapped the man sharply across the mouth.

The man stopped and stood flatfooted, staring in dumbfounded amazement. Up and down the street, everyone else also stared. "How dare I *what?*" the man mumbled.

Tack Largo bristled like an angry game cock. Righteous indignation flared from every pore in his body. "You ask what? This is incredible!" Tack Largo took his case to the gaping public now clustering around. "Did you hear that?" he shouted to the gathering. "This oaf presumes on my intelligence and my patience. He dares stand there with his stupid face bared to the world and ask me *what!* As though he didn't know! As though he hadn't carried his guilt to bed with him night after night for these many months!"

The crowd began eyeing the big man with the hostility always reserved for such rascals. But the man was recovering from his consternation now and as Tack Largo glanced up the deserted end of the street and saw Mace

disappear into the cave entrance, the man scowled in rage and moved forward with doubled fists. "You little pipsqueak! I'll—"

Tack Largo danced away, raising an admonishing finger, then dodged around the big man and ran off down the street and around the corner, leaving the crowd to discuss the odd little madman. Once out of sight, Tack Largo brushed back his hair and walked briskly toward the Adventurers Club . . .

Below street-level, Mace Hayden moved down a lightless tunnel. He was not familiar with his new surroundings having never been underground before. A fellow Adventurer had told him of this entrance into Danvers dread caves but had not gone into detail. So Mace knew only that the caves lay in a generally northeastern direction and that the tunnel should lead him there.

But the Adventurer friend had neglected to mention a huge door that barred Mace's way some two hundred yards from the entrance. A single dusty radium bulb glowed in the ceiling over the door that had evidently not been opened for many years. It was a huge bronze panel that one man could scarcely have pushed open had it been unlocked to begin with.

Mace scowled in frustration and jammed his shoulder tentatively against the bronze sheath. It did not even tremble. Mace knelt down and examined the lock, readjusting his plans at the same time. Obviously, he would have to find another means of entering the caves.

While he was thus engaged, he became conscious of a faint tapping somewhere in the tunnel. He realized the tapping had been going on ever since he'd reached the door but only now did it intrude upon his conscious mind.

He listened carefully until he had located the exact spot from which the timid sound came. He listened for a few more moments, then answered in kind with a heavy signet ring he wore on the third finger of his right hand.

Instantly the sound on the other side of the wall stopped. Mace waited. When it was not repeated, he tapped again. This brought a response and Mace bent close to examine the wall. As he ran his hand over the solid brick, the cement at eye-level suddenly turned to powder. A hole appeared between the bricks

from which a sharp point protruded. Then very rapidly the entire line of mortar around the brick cracked away and the brick was drawn inward.

A gaunt, fear-stricken face appeared. Two deep-set fevered eyes peered out. A voice croaked, "Have mercy."

"Who are you?" Mace asked.

"I—I— Have mercy."

"Be not afraid. I will not harm you. I'm trying to get into the caves."

Fear in the hideously emaciated face was replaced by wonder. "Satan's wounds! Trying to get *in?* Then you're stark mad and there is no hope for you. I've spent the last year trying to get out!"

"And I'll help you," Mace said, "if you'll help me."

"Of what aid could I be? An old and useless bag of bones."

"You haven't told me who you are."

"My name is Brandor. Once I was a great and mighty lord on the planet Mercury. I had ten thousand warriors at my back and I laid claim to fertile valleys and rich mountains where I ruled justly and fought injustice wherever I found it.

"When Danvers was establishing the Federation and rising to power he invited me to come here, under the guise of friendliness, and I was a fool for I did not recognize his treachery. When I arrived, he killed all who were in my party and imprisoned me. When my people inquired as to my whereabouts, he no doubt denied I had ever arrived at the Martian Interchange. Otherwise my warriors would have come to rescue me."

"Would they now?" Mace asked. He sympathized with the man instinctively but he was a realist and thought Brandor's subjects might possibly have been glad to be rid of him. He peered into the darkness surrounding the face of Brandor beyond the wall. "Are you in a cell?"

"Yes. It has been my home for longer than I care to remember."

"Can you remove more bricks?"

"Immediately. I have put many days and months of work on chipping away the mortar with a spoon my jailer overlooked. Now they are ready to be lifted out."

"Remove enough bricks to admit by body."

Brandor was already at work but he asked, "Why such a mission of madness?

And why this difficult method of entry? There are any number of ways a man can get into the caves without tearing away brick walls. Danvers enjoys having visitors down here."

"There is someone I must rescue. A girl—"

Brandor's cavernous eyes showed a spark of quick interest. "A small, dark girl?"

"Yes. Have you seen her?"

"I saw one such girl being dragged down the corridor. It sickened me the way those brutal guards were making sport of her misfortune."

Mace raged inwardly at the thought of coarse and brutal hands being laid on April van Dane's fair body. So great was his anger that he did not hear the stealthy footsteps outside the cell. He examined the lock and found it old and brittle. Evidently the guards had little fear of old Brandor smashing through.

Mace set himself and hurled a shoulder against the panel. It creaked in aged complaint. He attacked it again in the same manner and the lock snapped.

He turned to Brandor and said, "Go now, old man. Down that tunnel to the left you will find egress to the street."

With that, Mace gripped his short-sword and stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. Into a trap, because on either side of him stood a cordon of guards ready and waiting.

Mace whirled, but he realized it was too late to retreat. He could only stand and fight against impossible odds . .

After her three champions left, April van Dane lay sleeping the sleep of exhaustion in the Adventurers Club. She was awakened by a light hand upon her shoulder. She opened startled eyes to see the young attendant bending over her.

"Your friends left word that I was to awaken you at this hour," he said. "I am to take you across the Interchange to a rendezvous they have selected."

With no intimation whatever that this was an evil lie, April arose from her couch. She was clear-eyed and alert after the first dreamless sleep she had managed to get in many days.

Trustingly she went with him out into the street and allowed herself to be guided across the Interchange. "I am very fortunate," she said, "that Mace Hayden and his friends have taken my mission. I know they will succeed."

"Breaking Danvers' block-

ade will be a difficult job," the young attendant said.

"Yes," April said. "But such men to accomplish it!" Her eyes glowed. "There is probably no more daring and resourceful man in the universe than Mace Hayden. His—" April flushed as she realized her admiration and gratitude had set up the dashing Terran as almost a god in her heart.

The treacherous attendant was thinking: *Too bad that you'll never see your stupid Adventurers again.* But he held his tongue and motioned April to enter a small doorway leading off the narrow deserted street they were traversing.

"Is Mace Hayden waiting here?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss. Just inside."

But as she crossed the threshold, the attendant gave her a brutal shove and she fell into the arms of a tall, grinning man inside.

He was but one of the six who waited and as April, now realizing her betrayal, opened her mouth to scream, the Security man laid a rough palm over it and snarled, "Be quiet, wench. Danvers has plans for you."

He turned to the attendant with a scowl. "Be off with you, small one. Go to the Premier for your reward. I daresay it will be a large one."

As the attendant slunk away, one of the other Security men grinned at the helpless girl and said, "Too bad the Premier has this one on record. It would be interesting to conduct her trial and punishment ourselves in some uncharted cave."

A third man laughed. "Did you say trial?"

"Well, at least her punishment."

The man who held April—the leader of the group—snapped, "Enough of this! We have our orders and even the walls may be listening, so keep silent tongues in your heads, else you lose your tongues and heads alike."

With that, he turned April roughly and forced her to move down a dimly lit tunnel.

April was past the first point of shock and thus made no effort to call for help. She knew such a gesture would be useless and that probably these beasts only hoped to enjoy her pleas for mercy.

She knew she was in Danvers' dread caves and that all hope for her was gone. Yet, charged with the dauntless courage of her father and her people, she still hoped. Hoped that Mace Hayden and his

companions would carry out the mission successfully even though she herself did not live to witness the triumph.

Had she been aware of what was to transpire, she would have indeed sunk into the depths of despair.

The grim cavalcade stopped before a small steel door which was opened and April led inside.

"This will do until Danvers sends for our prisoner," the leader said, and with that proceeded to set manacles upon the girl's slim wrists.

The manacles were attached to chains bolted into the solid rock of the cave wall and as the leader stepped back, a weakness born of such horror swept over April that she almost lost consciousness. Only vaguely was she aware that the steel door had slammed shut, leaving her alone with the dim light filtering through the tiny window high up in the door.

Then, with the guards gone, she became horribly conscious of a terrible sound. An insane gibbering there close beside her in the locked cell. The sound of madness.

She was not alone in her prison.

The extent of her terror knew no depths as the mad chortling continued. Then, when her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she saw that it came from a twisted, emaciated figure crouching against the opposite wall.

April was too chilled to scream. She could only stare in utter horror at the wicked-eyed old crone who was her companion. The woman's clothing consisted of but a filthy rag about her middle, but even with the rest of her obscene body bared to April's gaze, it was not easy to determine that the creature was actually a woman.

The crone chortled again. Then she spoke. "I'm Vanya —Vanya, my dear. It was nice of them to send me so beautiful a companion. We'll drink tea and have a wonderful visit!"

The insane laughter came again, chilling April's already cold heart. "Tea?" the mad woman ruminated. "But there is no tea. The groceries did not come this morning and my tea service is tarnished. I wouldn't think of allowing so lovely a guests to use it."

"Please—" April said. "Please—who are you?"

"I told you, my dear—Vanya. I'm completely mad of course and they no longer pay me much attention. I'm not manacled, you see. These old

arms are so thin they slip right out of manacles."

April saw the mad eyes blaze even in the dim light of the cell and Vanya said, "No tea, but that is of little consequence my pet. We'll drink other things. We'll drink blood! Yes, rich, warm, young blood!"

The voice shrilled again into insane laughter and April fainted dead away, hanging limp from her manacles in that awful cell in the torture caves of Premier Danvers . . .

For Tack Largo, the uncovering of treachery in the Adventurers Club was a trifling task. He confronted the attendant and got a confession from the cowardly traitor in short order. Then he turned the youth over to the tender mercies of the Executive Board and went back into the streets of the Interchange.

But he felt cheated. His job had been so trivial in contrast to those of Pandak and Mace Hayden. Therefore he would seek out one or the other and share the greater danger.

He debated as to which man he would honor with his presence. And basing his decision upon the strange code of the Adventurers, he chose Pandak because he felt the Uranian's mission was a shade more impossible than that of Mace Hayden.

He found Pandak in the bar at the North blast-pits. Only three of the twenty-four hours previously agreed upon had elapsed, so the two Adcenturers got rid of the remaining twenty-one by the simple expedient of drinking them away.

At intervals, one or the other went out to check the loading of the *Space Bird,* Mace Hayden's ship. Finally, having roundly upbraided the bartender for daring to run completely out of whiskey, they discovered the waiting period was over.

"I'm going with you, of course," Tack Largo informed the Uranian.

"No. Mace instructed that only I make the attempt."

"I go with you nonetheless."

"It is such a hopeless mission that I make a counter-suggestion."

"Make it by all means."

"I suggest that I alone man the ship and attempt to run the blockade."

Tack Largo bristled. "Are you contesting my right to die in a useless attempt to complete an impossible mission?"

"Not at all. I'm merely

suggesting that you die in a different manner."

"What manner, Uranian?"

"In Danvers' Teleport Station are tons of food waiting to be dispatched to the colony. I have been through the Teleport as have you, and all that stands in your way is a lock on the door to the Lunar channel room. You have but to break the lock, enter and set the dispatching machinery into motion. If you attempt this we shall at least be losing our lives on two methods of operation rather than wasting manpower on a single method."

Tack Largo considered this. "I think you're right, Uranian. Is there any way I can help you before I start for the Teleport?"

"You might wait around and discourage anyone from delaying my blast-off after I batten hatches."

"Delighted." Tack Largo held out his hand and the huge Uranian took it.

Pandak said, "Farewell again, Venusian. It has been a good life. Perhaps there will be another once this one has gone."

"You'll find me waiting, Uranian," Tack Largo said. He turned and walked rapidly to the control tower. Entering the dispatch room, he noted with satisfaction that Pandak was already inside Mace's ship with the hatches tight, awaiting only the power to ignite the blast charge.

This was furnished through a control in the tower where the dispatch agent was scowling across the field while trying to contact Pandak. "Pilot of the *Space Bird*—pilot of the *Space Bird*. You have not signed the customs list. You must come to the tower and sign the list and state your destination. Pilot of the *Space Bird*—

Tack Largo strolled to the side of the dispatcher and said, "He is a friend of mine. A deaf mute who cannot answer. Give him power."

The dispatcher scowled in anger. "He can certainly walk to the tower and sign the—"

"Oh, I forgot to mention, he is also without legs. He asked me to sign and tell you his destination is an uncharted asteroid beyond Orion. His old mother has come down with the measles there and he must rescue her."

The dispatcher had no time to comment upon this strange destination because as he turned to look at Tack Largo, the latter drove a fist against his jaw. The blow was amazingly effective for one of Tack Largo's slim physique and the

dispatcher dropped from his chair, out cold.

Tack Largo reached across the chair and released the ignition power for Pandak's jets. And as the *Space Bird* rocketed into the thin air of Mars, Tack Largo raised his hand in salute and walked casually from the dispatch tower . . .

Mace Hayden's first vicious thrust pierced the heart of the nearest Security guard, and within an instant the tunnel in which he was trapped became a place of bloody confusion. The Security men were at a disadvantage because they were packed close together, and Mace Hayden was quick to take advantage of this. He stormed into their ranks with a viciousness born of supreme desperation and soon the tunnel rang with mixed shouts—screams of the dying, rageful curses of those trying to reach the stalwart Terran with a thrust of their blades.

Mace killed three; then a fourth screamed in agony as the Terran's blade went home. But Mace himself was now streaming blood from a dozen wounds and knew that he could not hold out for long. His only ambition was to sell his life at as high a price as possible. So he raged on, a suddenly invincible giant among murdering demons in a dark pit.

Then the inevitable happened. Slipping up behind the beleaguered Mace, the leader of the Security men dealt him a terrible blow on the head and Mace pitched forward onto the blood-slippery floor of the tunnel.

Immediately the leader sprang forward. "Don't touch him! Premier Danvers will want this one for a special ceremony in the pits! Kill him at your peril!"

The Security men backed away, growling like vicious dogs deprived of their rightful prey. Upon the leader's orders, two of them seized Mace by the arms and dragged him along the black length of the tunnel.

Consciousness returned to the Terran's whirling brain as he was being hauled into a dimly-lit cell. He felt his wrists gripped by irons and as he slumped to the floor, the chains bolting the manacles to the wall held him half-off the cold, dank floor.

Then the door slammed and the guard moved off down the tunnel. Mace hung there until the sound of their heavy boots died in the distance. When all was quiet, he strug-

gled to his feet and looked around him.

All was not entirely quiet. He could hear light feathery breathing — and something else. The quiet gibbering of insanity.

There were obviously two other occupants in the cell and only now was Mace able to make out their features in the dim light. "April!" he cried. "April van Dane!"

"Mace Hayden," the girl said in an unsteady voice.

Mace scarcely heard her. His eyes were riveted on the almost naked creature squatting against the opposite wall.

"I'm Vanya," the creature croaked.

Mace turned his eyes, narrowed in horror, upon April van Dane. "They imprisoned you here with—*that?*"

April smiled. "She's harmless, I think. Torture and imprisonment have robbed her of her mind. At first she frightened me but now I only pity her."

Mace looked again upon the crone. "Danvers' work?"

"Yes, Danvers' work. And there are more, she tells me. Many more."

Mace Hayden gritted his teeth and strained against the chains that held him fast. "All my life I have given service for a price. Now I would give everything I own to do the universe a free service by ridding it of that black monster!"

The crone Vanya squatted there, grinning at Mace. "You are indeed a magnificent speciman, Terran. Tell me how you got into so unfortunate a predicament."

Mace scowled at Vanya. "Silence, mad one. Let me think."

Vanya continued to grin slyly. "Perhaps not as mad a one as I appear."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "Perhaps it is an act for the benefit of my enemies—the guards and the Security men. But when I discover that certain ones are my friends, perhaps I would not be as mad as I appear."

"Speak something besides riddles."

"Mad and harmless, I am ignored by my jailers, so I am able to go and come without too much attention being paid. Only the outer gates are forever barred in Danvers' caves."

"You mean you can come and go as you like? That you can leave this cell?"

For answer, Vanya hopped to the rear wall of the cell. Her talon fingers gripped the

edge of a brick and withdrew it from the wall. She grinned over her shoulder." There are many entrances and exits such as this in the caves. I know them all. So do other of the prisoners. In fact, we down here are a world unto ourselves. We have a government and we execute those who disobey our laws."

Mace's handsome face lighted with hope. "If I could only free myself from these chains—"

Vanya hopped grotesquely to his side. She ran her fingers over his great muscles and chortled in glee. "I think perhaps the Terran does not realize his own strength. Those chains are not as strong as they appear to be. They have been embedded in that wall for many years. See? The bolts are loose."

Mace straightened. His eyes blazed. "Stand back."

As April and Vanya watched, Mace braced himself and set the power of his body against the chains. He strained in silence, his face darkening, the sweat standing forth on his brow. His muscles swelled and rippled and April, even in the dim light, could see his great heart pounding against the muscles of his chest.

Then, when he seemed defeated in his attempt, there was the sound of metal grinding, of the wall giving way and releasing the great bolts. One more mighty heave and Mace Hayden stood free, the two chains swinging from the manacles that still bound his wrists.

Without a word or a moment of rest, he turned to attack the chains that bound April. This task was comparatively easy since he was able to throw his power against one chain at a time. In a few moments she, too, was free.

Vanya clapped her hands and chortled. "See? For those with enough determination, nothing is impossible."

"Nothing but breaking Danvers' Lunar blockade," April said bleakly.

"I know nothing of that," Vanya retorted. "But come." As Mace helped April through the break in the wall, Vanya went on. "Do not think, Terran, that your troubles are over. In fact you will probably be dead within the hour because there is one below greater even than you, and if you go forward it must be over his dead carcass."

"Is this a man of whom you speak?"

"Aye. A man who rules the caves and lives only to kill.

He allows the weak ones to survive and do his bidding, but such a one as you must meet his challenge and your chances of survival are slim indeed."

"They are that already," Mace said grimly. "Lead on . . ."

Pandak sat stolidly at the controls of the *Space Bird* and watched Luna grow large on the glass of his radar-scope. But no ship of Danvers' Federation fleet had come in sight, so the Uranian's hopes were rising steadily.

But they faded as a cordon of the black watchers arced into view from the lower edge of the scope. His way was instantly barred and Pandak moved from the control seat to the firing board of Mace's slim ship, his jaw hardening with determination.

There were eight guns waiting to respond to his touch. Eight powerful guns, but against the hundreds available to the Federation gunners, they were but a joke.

Pandak shifted the control unit so that he could man the ship from two foot-units, leaving his hands free for the gun controls. Then he sought to create some brilliant strategy that would confound the blockade cordon and allow him to slip through.

But he realized his brain and skill were far inferior to that of either Mace Hayden or Tack Largo; that he could do little but follow his instinct — charge bull-like across the intervening space with all guns blazing. The chances of success were a thousand to one or greater, but this chance he had to take.

He set the ship on a straight course and as the first of the cordon came within range, he loosed his fire power. The power was extremely effective because the blockade ships did not expect it.

One of the black blockaders went into bright nova—then a second—because they had approached lazily, certain the stupid litle blockade runner was trying to sneak through and would turn tail at the first sight of the cordon.

Consternation r e i g n e d among the black ships as Pandak's gun created a fiery havoc that would have made the hearts of Mace Hayden and Tack Largo swell with pride.

For a brief time, there in the skies over Luna, a strange scene was enacted—that of a

crazed sparrow creating panic among eagles.

Then it was swiftly over. With four ships annihilated under Pandak's accurate gunnery, the remaining blockaders rallied and concentrated their fire-power into a single converging stream.

Even then, Pandak almost managed to win through. He avoided the heart of the blast. But its terrifying power reached out and crushed the tail of the *Space Bird.* Pandak, acting upon instinct, left the control cabin and ran forward. As oxygen shrieked from the fatally crippled ship, he donned a space suit and armed himself with hand weapons.

He had hardly got into the rig when a second blast split the ship from prow to keel. Still not a direct hit, but the steel of the hull was torn asunder and Pandak was floating in space along with the crates and cans and tanks that were to have been delivered to the starving colony on Luna.

Pandak had failed.

But this he had expected so he gave scant time to mourning the failure. Instead, he snarled at the cordon of enemy ships with little to support him except sublime courage.

Pandak, a tiny brave bug, floating in space, waiting to scratch the hull of a black blockader before the flaming guns blew him into fragments.

And miraculously, he achieved still another kill. Arcing in close to one of the ships, he turned his two guns on the control-cabin window. The heavy quartz melted under his fire-stream.

Then a chance shot from the ship broke his own protective glass. But he was close enough to the ship to hear screams of panic washing out into space along with the oxygen his blast had released.

Thus did the fierce Uranian die . . .

Tack Largo walked into the huge Teleport like any other tourist. He attached himself to a group that was being herded through by a uniformed attendant and he listened, completely bored, to the patter that went with the tour:

"In this room, ladies and gentlemen, you see teleportation in action. The workers, as you will note, are placing footstuffs and material on the belt that carries them into the large relay tube.

"You will note also that the belt emerges empty at the far end. Within that tube occurs

one of the true miracles of modern times. There, the supplies are transformed into basic vibrations and sent across space to the various planets of the Federation in this elemental state."

Tack Largo yawned and wished the attendant would get it over with. He wanted to approach the Lunar channel-room under cover of the group.

"This is the Venusian channel room," the guide continued. "On Venus is a teleport attuned to this one where the basic elements of the dispatched supplies are reassembled and distributed about the planet. Now if you will just move forward to the next room . . ."

Tack Largo walked behind a fat woman until he came to a padlocked door past which the guide moved with no word of description or explanation. There the dandified Venusian tarried and watched the group turn the next corner. He glanced up and down the empty corridor and then moved close to inspect the lock. Perhaps it could be broken, he thought, and perhaps not. One could only hope.

It could not be broken. Tack Largo proved this by inserting his short-sword through the hasp and applying pressure. Under the strength of Mace Hayden, either the lock or the short-sword would have given, but Tack Largo had not the power of great strength.

But he had other weapons just as effective. One of these was guile. He put it into use by returning his short-sword to its scabbard and leaning against the wall to wait.

He did not have to wait long. Soon a uniformed guide hove into view. Immediately, Tack Largo turned and began toying with the lock.

The guide moved forward with a scowl and tapped the Venusian sharply on the shoulder. "What are you doing, sir?"

Tack Largo turned in surprised innocence. "Trying to get in here. Have you a key?"

"Of course I have a key." The guide's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Why are you trying to enter that room?"

Tack Largo shrugged. "Nature calls and I thought it was possibly a lavatory. After all, when a man must—"

"It is not a lavatory. And you are under arrest for trying to—"

Tack Largo did not appear to hear this last. His attention had evidently been diverted by the guide's face. He stepped close to the uniformed

lackey and peered. "My, my! You'll get a demerit, lad. There on your chin—a great smudge."

The guide raised his hand, his expression one of concern. "Where?"

"Just—*there,*" Tack Largo said, and his fist indicated the supposed smudge with a straight right that started from his ankles and cracked with the sound of a small pistol.

Before the unconscious attendant hit the floor, Tack Largo had his keys and was fitting the first likely one into the lock. Neither the first nor the second worked, but the third one clicked reassuringly and the door to the Lunar channel room was open.

Tack Largo attempted to haul the inert guard's body beyond the portal. But he was thwarted in this. The weight of the inert form exceeded two hundred pounds—too much for the slim little Venusian to handle.

So again he waited, looking down at the guide; wondering why some people were smarter than others and why he himself was about the smartest of the whole lot.

Soon another guide rounded the corner and Tack Largo appealed to him with his large dark eyes. "This poor lad has had a stroke of some sort. Please help me get him through this door so he may have a little privacy in what may be his last moments."

The new guide bent down, then straightened and looked at the unlocked door. He pointed. "Why is the door to the Lunar channel room open."

"I think the blockade is over, but that does not matter. A life is at stake here. Act, man! Act quickly or this poor chap will breathe out his last moments in a public corridor!"

Scowling and somewhat confused, the guide lifted his fellow's body and carried it inside the channel room. Tack Largo, always considerate, allowed him to lay it gently down before bringing the hilt of his short-sword down upon the good samaritan's head.

But the guide had straightened up and the blow came a moment too late to still the frightened lips. The guide emitted a single scream before he joined the other in unconsciousness.

Looking down at both bodies, Tack Largo wondered if the cry had been heard. There was nothing he could do about it, however, so he closed the door and forgot the

matter. There was also the fact that anyone observant enough could see the open padlock on the outside of the door. Tack Largo could do nothing about that, either, so he did not let it bother him. To the mission, he thought, and what will be, will be.

A few moments later, he was examining the mechanism of the teleport machine. "How does this silly contraption work?" he asked himself. "Perhaps this button will cause something to happen."

He pushed the button and power whirred through the panel, lighting up various dials. "So far so good," Tack Largo said, and pushed another button. The belt began to move. "Excellent." Tack Largo smiled, immensely pleased with his mechanical acumen. "Now I have but to load this truck on the belt and success will be mine."

He selected a box marked cosmetics first, feeling sure the women of the Lunar colony would want to primp a bit before sitting down to the meal he would send them.

The box disappeared into the aluminum tube, but he was never to discover whether or not it reached Luna because at that moment the door was flung open and a dozen Security men tumbled into the room with drawn swords.

Tack Largo whirled and drew his own weapon. The Security men, sure of their prey, advanced slowly. Tack Largo, escape completely cut off in front, moved backward toward the rock wall at the rear.

He had no idea of escaping but planned to die with his back to the wall as befit a true Adventurer.

Then the Security men were upon him and he was fighting for his life—trying to take as many as possible with him into eternity . . .

Vanya, the emaciated crone, led Mace Hayden and April van Dane down the corridor that erupted suddenly into a vast, low-ceilinged cave. Light came from a dozen burning brands stuck in various places about the huge cavern. Here and there, squatted small groups of human wreckage that bespoke the cruelty of Premier Danvers. These poor unfortunates had been tortured to a point this side of death but to the far side of sanity and unimpaired physical structure.

Their bodies were bent and twisted. Legs, arms, eyes, were missing. All that was

left in these victims of the sadistic Danvers was the age-old desire to stay alive.

But Mace Hayden noted these monuments to horror only in passing. His attention was riveted upon a man who occupied a seat above the rest, which obviously served as a throne. He was a freak Terran and for some reason had fared better than the others in that his body had been left unimpaired.

He stood up as the trio entered the cave and his huge head just cleared the eight-foot ceiling. When he spoke, his voice was a bellow. "Who invades the realm of King Basil?"

The crone curtsied with a cackling simper. "It is I, O great king! I bring two new subjects for your pleasure. They are undefiled because I bring them fresh from Danvers' cells. Not yet have they tasted the fire of his tortures."

"The wench is beautiful," said the giant. "She will provide me with a few pleasant moments. The man—" King Basil scowled. "He will provide me with pleasure too. It has been a long time since one has entered here who could resist my strength and this child has possibilities. It might take me several minutes to kill him."

April van Dane was clinging to Mace's arm. "Let's run," she whispered. "Perhaps we could lose ourselves in some dark passage."

"Too late," Mace whispered. "See? They are blocking all the exits."

This was true. A number of the pitiful monstrosities had moved like deadly shadows. They now stood in front of the escape tunnels armed variously with swords and clubs and rocks. A great silence fell over the cavern.

"You could break through," April whispered. "Charge one of the weaker groups. It is useless for both of us to die. And I promise you I will find a way to kill myself before that beast's hands touch me."

"Do you actually expect me to run and leave you here?" Mace asked.

April van Dane almost smiled. "No. For a man like you, Mace Hayden, that would be impossible."

King Basil had advanced to the center of the cavern. He raised his great arms and beckoned to Mace with an evil grin. "Come forward, little Terran. I would embrace thee."

"There's nothing to do but fight," Mace told the girl. "It may divert their attention and allow you to escape. Take

advantage of the moment if it comes."

With that, Mace Hayden put her gently aside and advanced to meet the giant who stood waiting. He had no great hope of victory but calculated only to leave some permanent mark upon King Basil that would cause the freak Terran to remember the fight for a long time.

Like a stalking cat, Mace Hayden moved within range of the beamlike arms. They reached out to encircle him. He ducked under and threw a fist at the huge, naked belly. It drove against King Basil's flesh with every bit of power Mace Hayden had.

But it was like hitting a concrete wall. The giant bellowed, not from pain, but from annoyance at having missed his hold.

Mace pivoted away and again the two faced each other. Mace realized any possibility of effectiveness on his part lay in reaching a vital point in King Basil's anatomy. And the chance of doing so was indeed remote.

They circled, King Basil's bestial grin reflecting his enjoyment of the uneven contest. "Enjoy yourself, Terran. For each ounce of joy you experience, I shall extract a pound of agony before I allow the last bit of life to escape from your miserable carcass."

As King Basil circled, he came abreast one of the exits and the group guarding it slunk away. Hope arose in Mace's alert mind. Could April escape through this passage when he engaged the giant killer?

Mace set himself and sprang forward. It was now or never. He must get close enough to jam a thumb into a certain spot on the giant's neck. That would possibly paralyze him long enough for a decisive blow.

But again success evaded Mace Hayden. As he came within range, King Basil was ready. With surprising speed, the huge arms encircled the body of Mace Hayden and lifted it from the floor as a child might lift a doll.

Mace struggled desperately but knew it would avail him nothing. Neither cunning nor strategy would prevail against the grip of muscles such as those of King Basil. Mace Hayden might just as well have been caught in a steel trap.

Uselessly, he flailed at the giant with the chains that still hung from his wrists. King Basil only laughed in

sadistic delight. 'Come now, my precious infant—"

Suddenly the expression of pleasure dropped like a mask from the giant's face. It was replaced by one of surprise, then of agony. His muscles relaxed and Mace Hayden dropped to the ground. As Mace stepped aside, King Basil emitted a shriek of agony and pitched forward with a crash that echoed and re-echoed through the gloomy cavern.

As Mace Hayden's eyes cleared, Tack Largo stepped forward from the darkness of the tunnel in front of which the giant had stood. Tack Largo eyed the body with disgust and bent to wipe his short-sword on a scrap of the fallen monarch's clothing. "Big one, wasn't he?" Tack Largo murmured casually.

Mace Hayden went first in search of April van Dane. He brought her back to the cave entrance and told the dapper Venusian what had happened since they'd separated in the street above.

Tack Largo then told of how he had been brought to bay in the Lunar channel room and had fought the Security men to a standstill, forcing them to retire momentarily and send for reinforcements.

How he had used the moments in search and had found one of the loosened-rock exits the lower cave people had placed in practically every room of the huge Teleport. He had followed the passage and it had led him to the lower cavern. "And just in time, too," he said. "You owe me a drink for this little piece of work."

"And it will be paid, but first we finish this mission."

"Then it will never be paid," Tack Largo mourned, "because the mission will never be finished and we shall shortly die if we continue it."

"But we *will* continue it."

"Of course," Tack Largo shrugged. "Where do you suggest we go from here?"

Mace Hayden turned to the crone Vanya. "Tell me—when does the Federation Court open? When does the Supreme Bench sit?"

She simpered at him. 'Know you not, Mace Hayden, that the court sits even now?"

"That I know, but when is the time of the next session?"

"Within the hour. Why? Would you present yourself for trial, rash Terran?"

"Perhaps I would," Mace said quietly. "But first there

are some arrangements to be made."

He looked about at the skulking results of Premier Danvers' cruelty. They had come together in the center of the cave and were regarding him with uncertainty. "King Mace!" one of them croaked fearfully. The words were taken up by others as they sought to determine their status with this new monarch—or this pair of new monarchs—they were not sure which.

Mace said, "I guess we have nothing to fear from these poor devils."

"They are your servants, O King," Vanya said with a touch of mockery.

"It's your services I want, Vanya."

"I am your obedient servant. State but what you want and it shall be delivered if it is within my power."

"You know this building well?"

"As well as anyone."

"Then I would go on an inspection tour. I want to acquaint myself with the court room and what surrounds it."

As Vanya started down one of the passages, Mace said, "Stay close, Venusian. I have a job for you."

Tack Largo followed Mace and April through the darkness. "It's nice to be employed again," he said lightly . . .

Two hours had passed and the Supreme Bench, late as usual, filed into the vast, ornate courtroom and took places on the dais. There were seven robed men in the group, none with any outstanding characteristics save a common worried expression in the eyes. Danvers' puppets, waiting to do his bidding instantly.

Danvers himself occupied a chair at the prosecutor's table, thus demonstrating his democracy while this farce of pseudo-legal justice went on.

Mace Hayden had waited in a secret tunnel near the courtroom entrance. Tack Largo had long since been placed in the strategic position to which Mace had delegated him and now Mace awaited the showdown.

"Any permanent victory," Mace was explaining to April van Dane, "must be cloaked in legality. At least in the same cloak of false legality Danvers uses to cover his injustices."

"But is it possible to achieve this?" April asked.

"We can only try," Mace said. "And now is the time."

With that, he stepped boldly out into the great corridor

and led April into the courtroom.

Premier Danvers glanced up, saw the Adventurer and sprang from his chair. He was on the point of calling out, "Seize him!" when Mace raised a commanding hand toward the Bench and cried, "May it please the Court—I come as a suppliant asking redress for a wrong."

The courtroom was stunned at the audacity of this famed Terran and every eye was turned upon Danvers. How would the Premier react to this turn of events? Would he order Mace Hayden shackled and dragged away?

Danvers also, was deciding his course. He pondered carefully. There was public opinion to be considered here. Public opinion and the "legal" aspect of the case. He reached his decision quickly and with a smile of satisfaction. Why, the stupid Terran had played into his hands!

What better way to dispose of him than through the legal judgment of the Bench? There was no doubt in Danvers' mind as to what their decision would be on any plea Mace Hayden put forward.

Danvers nodded imperceptibly but the gesture was caught by the Chief Justice, a craven who defiled the memories of the great and noble Justices of ancient times.

The Chief Justice banged his gavel and intoned, "Let the suppliant be heard!"

He laid down the gavel in obvious relief, glad the Premier had indicated in the affirmative. Had Danvers not done this, the Bench would have been in a perilous position, since Tack Largo sat comfortably at the feet of the seven. He was completely hidden from the rest of the court room, his location being in a niche under the long desk at which the seven sat. Thus he was somewhat in the position of the prompter—that individual of the ancient drama who sat hidden at the front of the stage in order to remind forgetful actors of their lines.

Tack Largo had already begun to remind the fearful seven of their shortcomings. "You—third from the left—" he whispered, indicating the man by a sharp prick of his short-sword in the ankle. "You have very big feet. If this judgment does not go correctly, I think I shall slice one off as a memento of the occasion."

Thus the seven justices, sitting between hell and disaster, were dye to pass the

most agonizing half-hour of their lives. Tack Largo had said, "There are four fat bellies within striking distance of my sword. Unless you find for the defendant in this case, you will all leave this bench minus your insides."

The trembling Chief Justice said, "State your case, Terran."

Mace Hayden took April's deed from his pocket and held it forth. "I have here a deed," he said. "One signing over to the three men noted thereon —of which I am one—a property known as the Martian Interchange."

A gasp of surprise went through the court room. Premier Danvers scowled at such impertinence and planned the tortures he would inflict upon this upstart.

"What signature appears on this deed?" the Chief Justice asked.

The signature of April van Dane."

The gasp of surprise turned to a rumble. Danvers' face darkened and the Chief Justice quailed. He had held forth a desperate hope that the plaintiff would present a case with at least some semblance of an excuse to rule in his favor. But this was evidently not the situation and the Chief Justice knew the sickness of fear.

Only Tack Largo was enjoying himself. He was critically inspecting his seven prisoners and now he said, "You—the fourth slob from the right—you have egg on your chin from this morning's breakfast. I suggest you wipe it off."

The fourth justice hurriedly complied and the Chief Justice quavered, "How does this come within our scope and exactly what is your plea?"

"I ask a writ attesting to the legality of this deed and the deliverance of the property mentioned to the holders of the deed."

The Chief Justice was pale with fright. Whose wrath to risk? That of the terrible Danvers or that of the deadly upstart who crouched smiling within sword range?

"Second puppet from the right," Tack Largo whispered. "Wipe that drop of sweat off your bulbous nose. It ill-becomes you and besmirches the dignity of this honorable court."

As the droplet was wiped away, the Chief Justice found his voice. "But on what grounds could you possibly consider this document legal and binding?"

"On the grounds of absurdity," Mace Hayden said.

The Chief Justice was fighting for blessed minutes to place between the Bench and a decision that would be fatal either way. "Please explain. The Court is unfamiliar with these grounds."

"Gladly," Mace said. "In order to do so, I must refer to a previous decision of yours in the case of the Federation versus van Dane. In this decision the Court ruled that deeds issued hundreds of years ago—deeds not even definitely proved to be in existence and issued by unknown persons—were legal and binding when applied to craters on Luna.

"I maintain, your Honor, that the decision was completely and patently absurd—that, therefore, absurdity is a ground for affirmative legal decision—that this deed I hold in my hand is just as completely absurd and should therefore be adjudged legal and binding."

Now the whole case had been hoisted to the pinnacle of absurdity but the seven terrified men were grasping for any straw, however tenuous and they considered solemnly. They were aided in this by the obliging Tack Largo who tested the point of his sword on the paunch of the Chief Justice and said, "I'm sure that jurists with such lightning legal minds as yours will not have to consult in private on this matter. You are no doubt aware of the justice in the suppliant's plea and have no doubt already found for him.

"However, in order to give the decision dignity, I suggest you consult among yourselves there on the bench for as long a time as you deem necessary—say about thirty seconds. Then, unless you wish to part company with your miserable intestines, I suggest you find for the defendant."

There were thirty seconds of dead silence in the courtroom. Then the Chief Justice arose and in his terror, he croaked, "The Court finds for the suppliant. It declares the deed legal and binding."

Danvers came up from his chair with a roar of rage. "You stupid fools!" he screamed. "I'll have your lives for this!"

The Chief Justice, acting with the courage of a cornered mouse cried. "Silence, sir! Silence, or I'll cite you for contempt!"

Mace Hayden, taking advantage of the momentary confusion had moved close to

Premier Danvers. Now the Adventurer's short-sword touched a spot over the Premier's left kidney. The Security men, completely bewildered looked about for orders. As none came, they turned to the Premier.

But orders were not forthcoming from that source either because Mace Hayden whispered in the beleaguered dictator's ear. "I consider this victory only a bargaining point. That's all I ever meant it to be. But I think you had better agree to bargain quickly or you will be in shape only for a grave."

"Wha—what do you want me to do?"

Danvers' terror was genuine, but his crafty mind still operated. He would play for time; do anything this mad Adventurer asked until he was in a position to retaliate. Then vengeance would be swift and terrible.

Now that the die was cast, he would wipe out the Adventurers Club. There had never been any doubt in his mind that he could accomplish this and he now realized that ignoring them had been a mistake he would speedily rectify.

"Send the Security men away," Mace said, "and we will go to your office and bargain."

"Of course—of course," Danvers replied with some show of simulated geniality.

He gave the necessary signal and led the way from the courtroom, Mace following by his side with April van Dane, the sword point still nestling comfortably against Premier Danvers' quivering back.

At the door, the trio was joined by the happy Tack Largo who said, "This is indeed a red-letter day in my career. Someday I shall tell my children how I gave wise counsel to the Supreme Court and humbly aided them in reaching a momentous decision."

"Except for the fact," Mace said with grim humor, "that you will never have any children."

Tack Largo looked offended. "I'll inform you, sir, that I am extremely paternal at heart. I often yearn for the patter of small feet."

The quartette had been moving down a long corridor that led from the judicial section of the great building to the place where Premier Danvers maintained sumptuous offices.

They had no warning of

violence whatsoever, but as they rounded a bend they stepped into the middle of it. Suddenly the corridor was filled with maddened misfits from the lower caves. Mace Hayden, as he tried to wield his short-sword, got a flash of Vanya's hideous face in the foreground.

Then he and his companions were smothered in an avalanche of vile and twisted bodies. Tack Largo was unable to draw his sword as the three of them went down under the mound of horror.

But even then, Mace was aware of the fact that Premier Danvers was not with them. He and Tack Largo struggled until the pile of maimed bodies thinned out and they were able to sit up and see the last of the lower cave people scurrying away. But Danvers had disappeared.

Mace got to his feet and lifted April. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

"No—no, they just held me helpless."

"I also," Tack Largo said. "I could have smashed my way out, but—"

"But you couldn't bring yourself to hurt the poor wild creatures?"

"Something like that," Tack Largo said, frowning. "Somehow I could not bring myself to believe we were in any great danger."

"I got that idea too," Mace said.

"Nevertheless," Tack Largo said, brushing and preening himself like a fastidious cat, "we seem to have lost our prisoner."

"Do you suppose he escaped and ran back to his Security men?" Mace Hayden asked.

"For some reason, I don't think so, even though that would have been the natural thing for the coward to do. I have a feeling he was the object of this attack and that he is now being taken to the lower caves."

"Then it is our duty to rescue him."

"In heaven's name, why?"

"Because he is a human being and we are human beings. We can't let even Premier Danvers fall into the clutches of those miserable beings."

"Whether their right to vengeance is just or not?"

"Whether it is just or not."

Tack Largo shrugged. "Then let's go find him. I will lead the way. I've grown to know these caves and passages quite well."

So Tack Largo led Mace Hayden and April van Dane down into the underworld be-

neath the Teleport—beneath even Premier Danvers' dread torture caves.

After walking for some time, Tack Largo turned and said, "This is most amazing. I would have sworn to my dying father that I was on the right trail. But these surroundings grow unfamiliar. I do believe I'm lost."

"Well find yourself quickly, man! There is little time to lose."

"I'm well aware of that," Tack Largo said. "If we do not make haste those impulsive people might hurt the Premier. They might hurt him badly."

Tack Largo spoke with bright cheerfulness and studied the tunnel for landmarks. He studied it for quite a while and then said, "Let's try this tunnel."

But it led into another labyrinth and began sloping upward, whereupon Tack Largo, guide extraordinary, turned and said, "Mercy for a blunderer! I was sure I knew this maze like the palm of my hand. I think we'd better try another route."

He brought them finally to the great cavern below, but the scene that met their eyes caused Mace to scowl at the dandified Venusian. "I think you did that deliberately," he said.

"Did what?" Tack Largo asked innocently.

"Led us everywhere but here."

"How can you say such a thing?"

At any rate, it was too late to help the unfortunate Premier Danvers. He had answered for his crimes at the hands of those upon whom his cruelty had been visited so horribly.

April van Dane turned her face away from the terrible thing that lay in the center of the cavern—the thing that had been Danvers. "How can even these poor wrecks be so —so inhuman?" she said as she hid her face in Mace's arms.

"There is a certain justice in it," Mace said grimly. "They learned those bestial methods from the man himself."

"I think," Tack Largo said, "that we'd better investigate above. With Premier Danvers dead there may be some faint chance of sending supplies to your people."

But the chance, they discovered, was not faint. It was already an accomplished fact. With the Premier out of power, his underlings were anxious to escape what honest

wrath they could and were busy with all sorts of good deeds.

Not the least of these was the steady stream of supplies they were teleporting to the Lunar colony of van Dane. Nor were the three threatened in any way as they moved through the upper levels of the building.

"There will be a new day in the universe," Mace said. A new dawning of humanity and justice . . ."

Tack Largo had noticed how closely April van Dane clung to Mace Hayden. He noted also, the handsome Terran's absent manner and the dreamy aspect of his eyes.

So the Venusian was not surprised a few days later when Mace said, "I think I will have done with this Adventurer business. There comes a time when a man thinks of settling down and raising a family."

"Bravo!" Tack Largo applauded with mockery in his eyes. "You have asked the girl then and it is all arranged?"

"Not formally. I have not asked for her hand but all in good time. Her father and some of her friends arrive from Luna today. I will ask him for her hand. Those people cling to the old customs, you know."

"You'll pardon my instinct, friend, but it tells me that you have missed the boat—that you should have snatched up the wench and carried her to the far asteroids if you wanted her for her own."

"Why?"

"I don't quite know. As I said—my instinct—"

"Your instinct!" Mace said witheringly. "It's about as reliable as a broken rudder. Do you wish to come with April and me to the blast-port?"

"Oh, by all means. I wouldn't miss the tender scene of proposal and acceptance. A man needs such gentle things in this harsh world to make him realize that sweetness and light still exist."

They picked April up at her hotel. She was radiant as though she too realized this was the great moment. She clung to Mace's arm all the way.

But after the Lunar ship had set down and the passengers were coming down the ramp, April left his side and ran to a callow blond youth who was first off.

She threw herself into his arms and there ensued a love scene that made even Tack Largo's worldly eyes widen in surprise.

Then April took the youth by the hand and dragged him to where the two Adventurers stood waiting. "This is Ramos van Watts, my fiance," she said. "He will want to thank you for the way you protected me and helped me."

"Indeed I do!" the youth said and extended his hand.

The stunned Mace shook hands with the Lunite while Tack Largo whispered in his ear. "Say the word and I'll run this varlet through and thus preserve your romance. The girl will certainly not wish to marry a corpse."

"Be quiet!" Mace hissed.

"I beg pardon?" the Lunar youth said.

"I wasn't talking to you," Mace snapped.

The youth was puzzled. These Adventurers were peculiar people.

Mace said, "You'll pardon us. We have an appointment." With that he turned and walked rapidly away, not even waiting to meet April van Dane's father.

When Tack Largo was able to catch up with the big Terran, the former said, "A short romance, my friend."

"Shut up!" Mace barked.

"Oh, quite. But may I ask what this sudden appointment of ours consists of? My memory is evidently failing."

"We go to the Adventurers Club to buy another mission. Where else would two Adventurers go?"

"Where indeed?" Tack Largo said. "A mission that will take us into some far reach where you can forget the name of April van Dane."

Mace turned to stare balefully at Tack Largo. "April van Dane? Who's she?"

"That's my boy!" Tack Largo grinned affectionately. "Let us hasten or all the good missions will be gone."

THE END

QUICK CURE

By RANDALL GARRETT

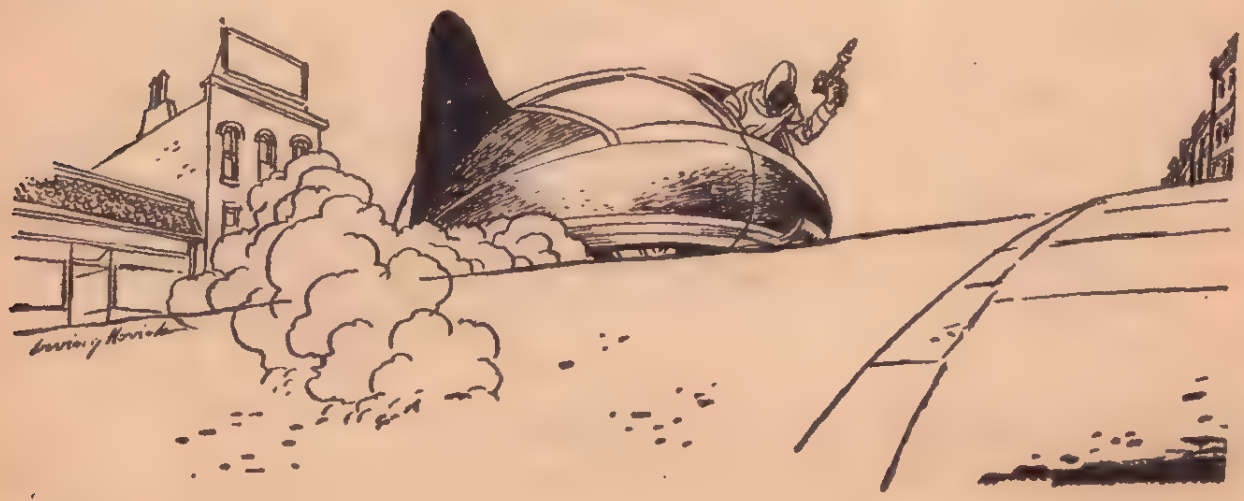
They needed a brain fixer on Kaibere IV, so naturally it had to be the best man in the business. That would be Dr. Kendrick Dell from Cardigon III. So the Doc showed up with a bag of tools and the desire to earn his fee.

It didn't work out as he had expected; for not only did somebody blow his hand off so he couldn't operate—there wasn't any patient not to operate on!

I

THE white-hot beam of energy that seared blindingly through the night air of Kaibere IV snuffed out two lives during the fraction of a second of its existence.

Kendrick Dell heard the woman's scream, but it was almost meaningless to him, combined as it was with his own hoarse shout. He stood for nearly a full minute staring in horror at the charred stump of his forearm where his right hand had been. Then, as footsteps pounded toward him, shock took its toll of his body and he col-



The girl had lost her life—and he had lost his livelihood!

lapsed limply, only a few feet from the body of the dead woman.

He wasn't dead, but his life was gone—a surgeon without a hand is no longer a surgeon.

He came up through the cloud of unconsciousness, his mind braced for the feeling of pain. Curiously, the pain didn't come.

A girl was leaning over him. She said: "How do you feel, Dr. Dell?"

It took him several seconds to realize just how he did feel. He didn't hurt; he just felt empty. He didn't tell the girl that; instead, he countered with another question.

"What the hell happened?" His voice sounded strained to his own ears.

The girl frowned. "Your right hand was burned off just below the wrist. I—I'm afraid I don't know any more than that.

"We've fitted a prosthetic; you'll be as good as ever as soon as you learn to use it."

Kendrick knew that was a lie. The synthetic flesh of a prosthetic could never replace his own hand.

"If you feel well enough," the girl continued hurriedly, "Colonel Tebrin of the Farn City Police would like to talk to you. He may be able to tell you more about the accident."

Accident, hell! thought Kendrick. "I'll see him," he said aloud.

The girl opened the door of the hospital room and said something to someone out of Kendrick's sight. A tall, lean man in a gray uniform appeared at the door.

"I'll only be a few minutes, Dr. Leeth," he said in a firm baritone.

Doctor Leeth? For the first time, Kendrick took a good look at the girl in the trim, light-green uniform. She filled it well, and the red-brown hair complimented the color nicely.

The colonel of police came on into the room as the girl left, closing the door behind her.

"Dr. Kendrick Dell?" he asked crisply.

Kendrick nodded.

"I'm sorry to bother you so soon after your operation," the colonel continued, pulling up a chair beside the bed, "but there are some things we'd like to know for the record."

"Perfectly all right," Kendrick said tonelessly.

The officer pulled out a notebook and consulted it. "We checked at your hotel room and the spaceport," he said. "You landed five days ago from—"

"Five days ago!" Kendrick said sharply.

Colonel Tebrin looked up from his notebook. "Yes. Didn't you know? You've been under anasthesia for four days."

"No, I didn't know," Kendrick said softly. There was something odd here. It didn't take four days to fit a new hand.

"Mmh. At any rate," the colonel continued, "you landed with the liner *Queen of Courlay*. Your place of origin is listed as Cardigon III. You checked in at the Farn Hotel, and then went sightseeing. That was at 1300 hours. At 2215, you were in front of the Old Fashioned Tavern on South Ninety-Second Street. Someone using a Lindhurst Fifty beamed down a woman named Kella Glay, and you happened to be in the way." He paused and looked up from his notes. "Is that it?"

"Essentially," Kendrick agreed.

The colonel made a note, then looked back at Kendrick.

"Dr. Dell, may I ask what your business is on Kaibere IV?"

"I am—was—one of the best neurosurgeons in the Galaxy," Kendrick said. There was no bragging in his voice; he had simply stated a fact.

"I am aware of that," the colonel said, "but what brought you here? A newly-settled planet like this would hardly sustain the practice of a man like yourself."

"I was given a substantial retainer to come here to perform some rather delicate brain surgery."

"I see. Who was your patient?"

"A man named Corwin. I was contacted by his wife, Mrs. Delpha Corwin."

"Mmmm. Do you know anyone on Kaibere IV?"

"Not a soul," said Kendrick. "I've never been here before."

"You said: 'a substantial retainer,'" the policeman said softly. "Now, Dr. Dell, I don't know what you charge for surgery of that sort, but I'd say that your reputation, plus the fact that you've traveled over fifteen hundred parsecs to take the case, would make the fee run well up around a hundred thousand stellors. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"You're close," Kendrick said.

"I thought so. That's what makes it so odd."

"Odd?"

"Yes. You see, I make it my

business to know everybody of wealth and importance here. It's easy to do, since there are only thirty thousand people on the entire planet. And I can assure you, doctor, there isn't any family named Corwin that could possibly put out money like that. As a matter of fact, I don't think there's anyone by that name on the planet."

Kendrick Dell sat in his hotel room flexing his new right hand. Even after two days, it was still numb and stiff. It always would be, he told himself dourly.

Colonel Tebrin had been right. There were no Corwins on Kaibere IV.

Kendrick felt a seething rage just below the surface of his thoughts. Somebody had paid out a thirty thousand stellor retaining fee to get him here. He'd gotten mixed up in a street killing and had his hand burned off —and now there wasn't even a patient to give the retainer back to. He'd have to do that, of course. The operation could never be performed—at least not by Dr. Kendrick Dell.

He looked again at his pink, new hand and swore softly.

"There's something damned screwy going on here," he said aloud, "and I, by God, am going to find out what it is!"

His first stop was the Old Fashioned Tavern, where he'd been hit by the energy beam from an illegal Lindhurst Fifty. He pushed open the door and walked over to the bar. The place was old fashioned, all right; there wasn't an automatic machine in the place, only human bartenders and waiters.

Kendrick ordered a drink, and, as the bartender poured, he casually slipped a five stellor note onto the bar. "I'd like a little information," he said quietly.

The barkeep grinned. "Yes, sir. What'll it be?"

"Do you know a woman named Corwin—Delpha Corwin?" Kendrick asked, picking up his glass.

"Corwin?" The man shook his head. "Nope. I don't think I ever heard that name before."

Kendrick changed his tack. "Were you on duty seven days ago, when the shooting took place?"

"Yeah. Boy, that was a mess. Dame killed and a guy wounded. They still ain't found who did it."

"I know. What I want to know is, was there a woman in here at the time—alone? She probably acted as though

she were waiting for someone who didn't show up."

The barman looked oddly at Kendrick before answering. "Yeah, there was a gal in here who was acting just like you said. She's the one that got herself knocked off out front."

Kendrick dropped the bill to the bar, and the barman scooped it up with a polite "Thanks."

It made sense, Kendrick decided. Hell, yes, it made sense! He'd been told to meet Mrs. Delpha Corwin at the Old Fashioned Tavern. There was no Delpha Corwin, but someone had been there to meet him, and that someone had been killed.

What was the woman's name? Colonel Tebrin had mentioned it, but the name escaped him. Well, there was one way to find out.

"What's the name of the newsfac in this town?" he asked the barman.

"Farn City *News*," came the answer. "Real original name, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Kendrick finished his drink and went out to the street to grab a taxi.

The little automatic machine pulled over to the curb at Kendrick's signal. He climbed inside and dialed the directory.

"Information service," said a voice.

"Taxi number for the Farn City *News*."

"Dial PENwyck 2-3391."

Kendrick dialed and the machine glided smoothly down the street.

Kaibere IV was a raw, new world. It was old fashioned and backwards because it had yet to build up any really heavy industry to make the machines and gadgets that provided the ease and comfort found on the older, more settled worlds. It wouldn't take long, though; Kaibere IV had plenty of potential wealth in her seas.

The great shallow oceans of the planet were filled with the peculiar seaweed that yielded the pseudo-hormone *azuronol*. The stuff could, of course, be synthesized, but it cost about eighty times as much as the natural product, and couldn't be made in quantity. And, because of the high cobalt content of the seas of Kaibere IV, it was the only place in the Galaxy where the azuronol plant would grow.

And azuronol was important; it was the only known substance which would stimulate the regeneration of nerve tissue in a human body. Mus-

cles, glands, and bones, when damaged, can repair themselves, if the damage isn't too bad. But not nerve tissue. Once a nerve is damaged, it is damaged forever—unless the patient is doped with azuronol during the healing process.

With such a gold mine as that, it wouldn't be long until Kaibere IV was the most important planet in the Galaxy.

The autocab pulled up in front of an imposing looking building which had the words FARN CITY NEWS emblazoned over the door.

Kendrick pushed open the door and went in.

He did some fast talking with the receptionist and managed to get permission to look through the files. The girl showed him to the reproducer and left him.

Kendrick punched for the morning issue of the day after the killing. Within seconds, the newly-printed sheets were sliding out into his hands.

The killing had made the front page. There was nothing in the article that he hadn't known previously, except the woman's name and the fact that she had been a private secretary to the Planetary Governor.

Kendrick wondered why Colonel Tebrin hadn't mentioned that.

He checked the next four issues of the newsfac, but nothing new had turned up. There seemed to be absolutely no motive for the killing, no reason for the girl's death.

The one other bit of information that interested Kendrick was that Kella Glay had been unmarried. If she had been the mysterious Mrs. Corwin, where was Mr. Corwin? Who was the patient he was supposed to operate on?

There was nothing else in the sheets before him. He pushed them into the disposal chute, thanked the receptionist for her trouble and went back to his hotel.

Colonel Tebrin was waiting for him.

"I've been waiting here in the lobby," the colonel said smoothly. "I'd hoped you might join me in a drink."

"Glad to," said Kendrick, wondering what the policeman had on his mind.

The hotel bar was more modern than the Old Fashioned Tavern; there were automatic mixer panels at each table. The colonel led the way to a secluded booth, dropped coins in the panel and dialed the code for beer.

The colonel drank half of

his before he said anything. Then he said: "Dr. Dell, I understand you've been prowling around town doing a little detective work."

"Anything wrong with that?" Kendrick asked.

"Don't you think it would be better to leave that to the police?"

"The police haven't found out anything yet," Kendrick countered.

"Neither have you," Tebrin said. "If anything is found, I'm sure we'll be the ones to do it. You must remember, doctor, that this is a frontier planet. We have one city and millions of square miles of uninhabited country. Our killer could live out in the forest somewhere for years without ever being found. We can't always be as efficient as we'd like to be. Nevertheless, we're doing our best."

"Look here," said Kendrick sharply, "are you telling me to quit snooping around? Because if you are, I'm telling you right now you can go to hell. I'm not doing anything illegal, and you know it. If you try to stop me illegally, I'll go straight to the Planetary Governor."

"I—" Tebrin began, but Kendrick cut in.

"I'd like to remind you, colonel, that I had my hand shot off a week ago—my *right hand!* Do you know what that means to a surgeon?" He held out the hand and wiggled the fingers in the officer's face. "Sure, I can move 'em! I can pick up cigarettes, beer glasses, and spoons! I can even zip up my pants. But I can't operate with it. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. *I can't operate!* Do you have any idea what that means?"

"I think—" the colonel tried again. But he was cut off.

"I'll tell you what it means: It means that I'm going to find the son of a bitch that did it if I have to take this stinking planet apart one person at a time!"

Kendrick stopped and sat there, flexing the fingers of the numb prosthetic.

After a moment, Tebrin said: "I think I understand, and I sympathize. Nevertheless, I warn you: stay out of police business. If we find him, I assure you he'll get what he deserves. After all, we'll have him on a murder charge.

"My advice to you is: catch the next liner for home. The *Fomalhaut* leaves tomorrow; I think you should be on it."

"Is that supposed to be an order?"

"Not at all," said the colo-

nel smoothly. "I am only thinking of your welfare. The loss of your hand has undoubtedly caused you a great deal of anxiety. I feel that your actions have become distinctly neurotic, caused no doubt by shock. On Cardigon, you can get proper therapy; we haven't the facilities here." He stood up. "I'm very sorry to have to say that, believe me. But I still feel you should take that spaceliner."

Kendrick said nothing, and after a moment, the colonel turned and walked out the door.

Kendrick Dell paid no attention to him. Instead, he sat looking at the synthetic flesh of his right hand. Not in anger or hatred, but in a kind of dumb awe.

The fingers were beginning to tingle!

Finally, after several minutes, he stood up and walked out of the bar and across the lobby toward the elevator. The lobby was full of people, but Kendrick took no more notice of them than they took of him.

There was something wrong with his new hand.

He stepped out of the elevator and headed toward his own room, still flexing and rubbing the synthetic flesh of his right hand. He unlocked his door and calmly stepped inside.

There were three men standing in the middle of the room. They were masked and one of them was pointing a stun gun at Kendrick's stomach.

His mind came sharply back into focus. "What the hell do you want?" he snapped.

"We want you to come with us," said the man holding the stunner.

At that, Kendrick blew up. He had been maimed, lied to, cheated, pushed around by an overly solicitous cop. Now it was kidnaping, and that was just too damned much.

He took a flying leap at the legs of the man with the gun. It went off, and the stun beam whined over his head. The kidnaper toppled over backwards. Kendrick jumped up and hit the second man hard in the solar plexus. He doubled up and a fist of synthetic flesh smacked satisfyingly against the point of his jaw.

The third man grabbed his arm and tried to twist it behind his back, but Kendrick twisted away and chopped at the man's neck with the edge of his palm. But his target moved too fast; the kidnaper

leaped back out of Kendrick's reach.

Kendrick heard a noise behind him and turned suddenly. The fallen man with the stun gun had pointed the weapon straight at Kendrick's head. The weapon snapped and whined, and Kendrick didn't hear another thing.

His hands were bound behind his back, and his ankles were taped together. That was the first thing Kendrick realized when he opened his eyes. The second thing was that the man with the stun gun was sitting on a chair facing him. The plastic mask still covered his face.

"You've finally come out of it, eh?"

Kendrick didn't even bother answering. He tried twisting his hands in the tape binding, but the ribbon was too tough to give much.

"I don't think you'll get out of that," said the armed man quietly. "And if you do, I'll give you another dose of the stunner before you try anything."

Kendrick's eyes narrowed. Then, in low, even tones, he started to talk. He used every filthy expletive he knew, and directed them at the man in the chair. When he had run out of words, he started all over again, this time with reference to the parents, sisters, brothers, cousins and friends of his assailant.

When he ran out of breath, he filled his lungs twice, and then added: "And that goes for your boss, Colonel Tebrin, too!"

"What about Tebrin?" asked the other sharply. He had calmly ignored Kendrick's preceding remarks.

Before Kendrick could say anything, the masked man went on: "Believe me, Dr. Dell, if this were Tebrin's work, it wouldn't have to be this hush-hush. Tebrin would have done it officially, neatly, and without fuss. I'm afraid we have to be rather crude about it.

"Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions, and your answers will be what decides what's going to happen to you in the next few minutes. I'm not threatening you—I'm just telling you."

Kendrick didn't say anything, so the man went on.

"You came here to operate on someone. Who was it?"

Kendrick's hands were working with the tape behind his back. To stall for time, he answered the question, telling exactly what he had told Tebrin.

"And you came here with no more information than that?"

"It seemed like a perfectly legitimate case," Kendrick said. "I had no reason to believe otherwise."

"Did you know Kella Glay, the woman who was killed?"

"No. But I think she was the mysterious Mrs. Corwin."

"What?" The man's voice sounded excited.

Kendrick explained. He did it slowly and carefully; the tape around his hands was beginning to give a little.

"All right, Dr. Dell. Now I'm going to explain something to you. You don't know much about the political setup here, do you?"

Kendrick didn't, and admitted it.

"Theoretically, it's like any other newly settled planet. We have a Planetary Governor appointed by the Galactic Council. He is responsible only to the Council and can theoretically become an absolute dictator in times of emergency.

"But Kaibere IV is an unusual case because of the azuronol production here.

"Here's what our group has found out. Part of the azuronol production is being diverted from legitimate channels, and the profit is going into the pockets of our friend Colonel Tebrin, who, by the way, is the most powerful man on this planet."

"That doesn't make sense," Kendrick objected. "In the first place, there wouldn't be any market for bootleg azuronol, and in the second place, Tebrin couldn't do anything like that without the Planetary Governor knowing about it.

"And don't try to tell me that the Governor is in on it. Those men are tested and conditioned thoroughly by the Galactic Council before they are allowed to take training for the position."

"I know," said the man softly. "That's what's bothering us. Our group still hasn't figured that angle out yet."

"You keep saying: 'Our group,'" Kendrick cut in. "Just what is your group?"

The answer came, but not from the man in the mask. A door on the other side of the room was pushed open and a girl came in. Kendrick recognized her after a startled moment. It was Dr. Leeth, the girl at the hospital.

"Mayna!" the man in the mask shouted. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Calm down, Dad," she said. "I had to come as soon

as I found out that you had Dr. Dell here."

"But you weren't supposed to contact me in any way! If Tebrin suspects—"

"Dad," she interrupted, "I've been trying to get hold of you for four days, but I didn't have a chance to get away from the hospital until a short time ago." She walked over to the couch where Kendrick was lying and began to peel off the tape on his wrists.

"Mayna!" the man she had addressed as "Dad" said, "are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Certainly. Remember, I had him under azuronol for four days. That, plus the sedative, kept him helpless and rather talkative. He doesn't know any more about this than you or I."

As the last of the tape came off, Kendrick sat up and began removing it from his ankles. "Would you two mind explaining who you are and what the blind hell is going on?"

"I'm Mayna Leeth, as you know," the girl said calmly. "This man is my father, Dr. Edder Leeth. There are several other doctors with us; we're part of a Galactic Council Project to study the effects of azuronol on the human nervous system. Unfortunately, ever since we discovered azuolamine, we've been constantly under the thumb of Colonel Tebrin and the police."

"Azuolamine?" Kendrick looked at her oddly. "How many more new drugs are you going to pull out of the hat?"

She laughed softly. "We've got several. Azuolamine is a derivative of the original azuronol; it's a habit-forming nerve stimulant.

"I think you can see what that would mean. It's as vicious as opium or heroin or nitrolabe, except that instead of depressing the central nervous system it stimulates it. Under its influence, a person feels excited, alive, gay, and giddy. The senses are alert, the muscles ready for action.

"But when it wears off, the patient sinks into depression. Everything seems gray and dull and boring by comparison. So he takes another dose. Eventually, he needs the drug just to feel normal; the stuff burns out the nervous system from overcharge."

"I see," nodded Kendrick. "And that's what Colonel Tebrin is diverting some of the azuronol shipments for. He makes azuolamine out of it. I suppose he intends to

start a new drug traffic in the stuff."

"That's the way we have it figured," said the girl. "We are trying to stop him before anything can get started on a Galaxy-wide scale."

Kendrick still wasn't absolutely sure where he stood, but at least his hands and feet were free. He decided he'd play along for a while.

"Why haven't you done anything about it?" he asked. "Why haven't you reported it to the Planetary Governor or to the Council?"

Edder Leeth had taken off the plastic mask to reveal an older, masculine version of his daughter's face. "We can't prove anything," he replied. "We know he's got a big cache of the drug hidden somewhere, and we know he's got a pilot plant set up somewhere to process it. But we can't search a whole planet. Even with the Galactic Navy to help us, it would take years.

"Besides, if we even let Tebrin know we were suspicious, it would be the end of us. He'd have us hushed up fast."

"Just where do I fit in on this?" Kendrick wanted to know.

"We don't know," said Edder. "You were brought here by someone to do prefrontal surgery on someone. That's all we know."

"Dad's been out in the countryside for several months, trying to get a lead on his plant," Mayna supplied. "We feel sure it must be close to Farn City. And, so far, we've found nothing."

Kendrick stood up and glanced at his watch. "It's past midnight. Tebrin warned me that I'd better take the liner for Cardigon tomorrow —that is, today. I'm going to get some sleep and then see if I can dig up anything on the colonel." He paused, then said savagely. "And if I can't do that, I'll kill him myself!"

Kendrick caught a cab from the suburban house where the Leeths had held him. He dialed the number of the Farn City *News* and fidgeted impatiently as the car sped through the dimly lit streets.

The building was closed, but there was a night editor on duty who agreed to let Kendrick look through the files after a fifty stellor note changed hands.

First, he checked through everything they had on Colonel Ald Tebrin. There wasn't a devil of a lot, but there was

enough to tell Kendrick what he wanted to know. The pieces began to fall into place rapidly.

All he needed now was the master key, and the whole business would be as clear as day. He wasn't sure exactly what the thing was he was looking for, but he knew he'd recognize it when he saw it. It took nearly four hours of search before he finally came across the piece he was looking for. By that time, he'd fed hundreds of sheets of print into the disposal slot, and his fingers were sore from punching buttons.

The item was headlined:

PLANETARY GOVERNOR IN AIRCAR ACCIDENT

Kendrick read it through and grinned tigerishly to himself. That was it. There was no doubt in his mind about what had happened and why. All he had to do now was set a trap.

He left the *News* building and went to a public phone. The Leeth residence was in the directory. Edder Leeth answered the phone.

"What is it, Dr. Dell?"

"How would you like to get your hands on Tebrin? I mean permanently, and with no suspicion directed towards you."

At first, Dr. Leeth wasn't quite sure he approved of the idea, but within a few minutes Kendrick had him waxing enthusiastic.

When everything had been arranged satisfactorily, Kendrick cut the circuit and dialed another number.

Colonel Tebrin had evidently been asleep. His face on the screen looked half-awake, and his hair was awry.

"Who is it? . . . Oh. What the devil do you want this time of night, Dr. Dell?" His voice was peevish.

"I hate to get you up, colonel," Kendrick said suavely, "but I ran across some information that might interest you. I have positive evidence that links up the murder of Kella Glay with the azuolamine manufacturing on this planet."

The colonel's eyes grew wide, then narrowed again. "How did you learn that?"

"Never mind. If you want to find out, you can pick me up at the corner of Beck and Fourth Street in twenty minutes. I want you to come alone, and I don't want you to get any ideas that you can take me in. The information I have is well protected."

"I'll be there," said Tebrin coldly.

"I figured you would,"

grinned Kendrick. But the phone was already dead.

Twenty minutes later, the big police car, with Tebrin driving, pulled up alongside the curb where Kendrick Dell was standing. Kendrick was ready for him. He opened the door and slid in alongside the colonel; almost in the same motion, his hand reached swiftly out and jerked the gun from the astonished Tebrin's holster.

He pointed the heavy Lindhurst Twelve at the policeman's chest. "I'm sorry, colonel, but it's necessary. We're going to have a little talk, then we're going for a ride. Just behave yourself."

The colonel said nothing, but there was hate in his eyes.

When Kendrick pushed Tebrin through the front door of the Leeth residence forty-five minutes later, dawn was beginning to show in the east as the planet rotated to face the Kaibere sun. In the living room were eight men and a girl. All of them were armed. Kendrick knew who they were: members of the research team that was working on azuronol.

He pushed the officer into a chair and then sat down where he could see everyone in the room. Eight stun guns and a Lindhurst Twelve faced Colonel Tebrin.

"Colonel," Kendrick said conversationally, "you're one of the biggest egotists I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Or maybe the term should be 'glory hog.' If you hadn't tried to go into this thing on your own, you wouldn't have bungled it so badly."

The colonel glared at him.

"When a man is on trial," Kendrick continued, "it's customary to present the evidence against him, so let's look at it.

"Eight days ago, Kella Glay, secretary to the Planetary Governor was shot and killed. My right hand was burned off at the same time. All this time, we've been looking for a killer, and we've gotten exactly nowhere. Why? Because the killing was entirely accidental! The killer didn't want her; she happened to step into the way of the beam just as the gun went off. The target was my right hand!

"Why? So I couldn't operate.

"Now, we'll have to go back a little farther to explain that. A litle over a year ago, the Planetary Governor was hurt in an aircar accident. He was taken to a hospital. While he was there, someone perform-

ed a very simple operation on his brain. Certain nerve trunks were severed. After it was over, the Governor seemed almost the same as ever, but a tiny receiver had been planted in the brain tissue. By broadcasting the proper pulses, the Governor could be made to do anything the operator wanted him to.

"He wasn't asked to do much, just cover up the fact that the full quota of azuronol wasn't going where it ought to.

"Kella Glay found out about the gadget somehow, and she knew that removing it and replacing the nerve trunks took greater skill than the comparatively simple operation that put it there. She knew that if the drug ring ever found out what she was up to, they'd take steps against her. So she sent for me, using the phony name of Corwin.

"But evidently the news leaked out. It was almost too late for our master-mind to do anything, but he did follow me around with a Lindhurst Fifty. He fired just as Kella Glay stepped out of the Old Fashioned Tavern.

"He would have had to kill her eventually, of course, but I have a hunch he didn't know she was going to be there. It was pure luck on his part that she stepped into the beam.

"There is, of course, only one man who could have—

"Oh, no, Dr. Leeth! Drop that gun!" Kendrick had swung the deadly Lindhurst Twelve so that it pointed at Edder Leeth.

Stunned as they were, none of the other doctors had time to move at first. Then one of them took the stun gun out of Leeth's hand.

"How did you know?" the doctor asked. His voice shook.

"Earlier this morning, you said you knew I'd come here to perform a prefrontal operation. How did you know it was that particular area of the brain? I'd never told anyone.

"You've been playing both ends against the middle, doctor. The rest of the men on the research team knew that the drug was being stolen; you couldn't conceal that. So you made it look as though Tebrin were behind it.

"And the colonel played right into your hands, as you knew he would. His record shows that he likes to play the lone wolf. He could have called in the Galactic Navy, and he would have done it eventually. But he wanted a

(Concluded on page 120)

THE SORE SPOT

By IVAR JORGENSEN

Maybe the tourists visiting the City of Terror could be frightened by the name Alan Tremaine. But not a beauty by the name of Gloria Hadley. Seems she knew exactly how to handle the hard guys on any planet you could name!

"Sorry, lady."

THE guide, an enormously fat Venusian with heavily lidded eyes and a bare leathery chest down which the sweat ran in rivulets, held up his plump arms and said: "We are now approaching that part of Venusport which some people call The City of Terror. Interplanetary Tours, Incorporated will not be responsible for your safety once we get inside the gates. Is that understood?"

It sounded too much like a frightening come-on pitch for any of the Earthmen or Martian tourists to back down, although two unattached women in the rear row titter-

one of the guards said. "Nobody goes in there."

ed nervously. The so-called City of Terror was surrounded by a sheer wall of age-grayed adobe. Behind the wall one could see the drab buildings of the city rising tier on tier above its climbing hills. The guide went on:

"The City of Terror is a haven for hundreds—for thousands—of criminals fleeing the law. Not merely native Venusians, but Martians and Earthmen as well. Every Venusian government since the year 2270 has promised to clean up the city, which exists disgracefully side by side with Venusport itself, but so far no administration has dared make an effective raid by police within its walls. The City of Terror, as you shall see, tolerates solitary policemen. Now, if there is anyone who would rather await the tour outside these gates, will he please step forward?"

No one did. After all, they said, wasn't this the twenty-fourth Century? The guide used an interesting come-on pitch, but if the so-called City of Terror was unsafe, would not the Venusian government have declared it out-of-bounds for tourists? Why, the gate between Venusport and the City of Terror was not even shut.

"Very well," the guide said, and led his fifty-odd charges inside.

Half an hour later, after thrilling to the sights of an outlaw city, after seeing the Venus Quarter, the Earth Quarter with its sub-divisions, the Martian Quarter, the Jovian Moon Quarter, the tourists were waylaid in a narrow street which turned out to be a cul-de-sac and robbed of their jewelry and money by two Earthmen and a Venusian who didn't even bother to wear masks. The take, in Earth money, was better than thirteen thousand credits.

The angry and frightened tourists filed their complaints in the Venusport police station. The chief of police was very polite but admitted the criminals would never be apprehended.

Late that night, in the Cafe of Everlasting Passion—deep within the City of Terror—the guide, whose name was Faqs Lakor, brought thirteen hundred credits to the back room of the Cafe, sat down comfortably with a bottle of wine, and waited.

Presently Alan Tremaine entered the room, smiled at Faqs Lakor and said, "They're still falling for it, aren't they?"

"They always will," Faqs assured him, handing over the thirteen hundred credits. "Ten percent for you, Tremaine. There you are. We ought to make your title official. King of the City of Terror, eh?"

Tremaine took some of the wine and drank it. "King?" he said. "Prisoner, you mean. I haven't been outside the gates in three years, Faqs."

"Does it matter? Here you are a potentate. Here you have a hundred thousand loyal subjects. Out there you would be a fugitive. Out there, only prison awaits you."

Tremaine shrugged. He was a tall, fair-haired, dark skinned man in his early thirties. He looked almost pure Earthman but had the faintest suggestion of Venusian blood in the length of his jaw and wide-spaced, sleepy-looking eyes. He said, "The City can be a prison, too. Faqs, sometimes I wonder—"

"What you are doing here? All of us who are not too far gone wonder that. For the rest of the solar system, peace is sacred, not the thrill of adventure. For the rest of the solar system—but why go on?" Faqs grinned sycophantically. "I am sure your thoughts on the subject are more significant than mine."

Tremaine sighed and drank more wine. That was another bar in his own personal prison. Their fawning attitude. All of them, he thought. All of them I can trust are that way. Except Parilla. He smiled again and wondered what Faqs or all the others would do if they knew only a Venusian-Martian halfbreed girl named Parilla kept him from leaving The City altogether and taking his chances on the outside.

"Oh," said Faqs, "I almost forgot. Outside there is someone who wants to speak with you."

"Who is he?"

"A stranger, although I have seen him in Venusport. He drives a coptercab, I believe."

"All right, Faqs," Tremaine said. "Send him in."

The fat Venusian bowed and departed. Tremaine stood facing the door. When it opened, the sounds of the Cafe of Everlasting Passion drifted in. A girl was singing in a native Venusian dialect. There was a dimly heard, chanting chorus and the stamping of bare feet and an occasional drunken shout.

The door did not open very far. It admitted the thinnest man Tremaine had ever seen. His skull was bald and glist-

ening with sweat, his eyes protruded, his faded clothing hung slackly over his emaciated frame. He said, "You are Tremaine?"

"Yes," Tremaine said.

"I risked my neck coming in here. I expect to be paid."

"For what?" Tremaine asked him coldly.

"You are arrogant. When I say what I have come to say, you won't be arrogant."

"Then say it and get out."

The small, thin man closed the door softly behind him. He advanced into the room with the barest whisper of sound. "A new Inspector of Police arrived in Venusport yesterday," he said, not looking at Tremaine. He was studying the room, the back room of the Cafe of Everlasting Passion which the guides usually pointed out to their tourists from the comparative safety of the streets as the high spot of their tour of the City of Terror. "It is in that room," the guides always said in the proper hushed, respectful, awed tone, "that Alan Tremaine, unofficial King of the City of Terror, has his headquarters. From that room, he reaches out with the tentacles of an octopus, controlling all the criminal activity of this city . . ."

"All right," Tremaine said indifferent. "So they have a new inspector. They're getting new inspectors all the time because the old ones can't cope with the City. What do you want me to do?"

"You haven't heard the Inspector's name."

"All right, what's his name? Tell me and then get out of here," Tremaine said indifferently.

The emaciated copter-cab-man took a deep breath and said, "The new Inspector of Police is an Earthman named Mark Hadley."

Tremaine stared at the little man. He saw a thin, particularly ugly Venusian with shifty eyes and a furtive attitude, but his mind drifted back quickly across the gulf of years and the greater gulf of space. How does a man go wrong? he thought. Usually, there is a trigger, something in his life which points it in the wrong direction, a direction from which there is no return—

"Hadley?" he said. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," the little man said. "It ain't just any Hadley, either. When we got a celebrity like Alan Tremaine with us—begging your pardon, sir—I figure it pays to know his background. It's the same

Hadley you're thinking of, Tremaine. I'm telling you."

Tremaine took a handful of the money Faqs had given him and shoved it across the bare table. The little man pocketed it with a quick motion and said, "I'll be around if you ever want more information. Accurate and fast. My hack is down by the police station, would you believe it? Just ask anyone for Dowser."

"Dowser?"

"That's me. Dowser. They say I'm like a dowsing rod. Only," Dowser grinned, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, "I don't point toward water. I point toward trouble."

For a long time after Dowser had gone, Tremaine sat staring at the closed door. The sounds of the cafe could be heard indistinctly now, as if great distance and not merely the thickness of the door separated them from Tremaine. Mark Hadley, he thought. It was Hadley who had started Tremaine on the road which lead inevitably toward the City of Terror.

Not Hadley alone. Hadley and Gloria. Mostly, it had been Gloria. Hadley's wife. Mrs. Gloria Hadley, who had been Tremaine's fiancee, long ago on Earth. He wondered if she were with her husband here in Venusport now. He shrugged. He could always send for Dowser and find out. Unfortunately, he wasn't free to find out for himself. But he wondered what Gloria would do if she knew he was here in the City of Terror right now . . .

"It's going to be another scorcher," Mark Hadley said, mopping his brow with an already sodden handkerchief.

"You could say that every day of the year on Venus, I understand," Gloria Hadley said.

"I suppose so, but we've only been here a week and I guess I can't get used to it. Gloria, are you sorry you came?"

"No. I have a hunch it's going to be exciting before we're through."

"Excitement? That's what you want."

"Yes, Mark."

"And are there not other things—"

"Aren't you being a little narrow, Mark? What does a professional policeman want, except excitement?"

Hadley lit his first cigarette of the day and smoked it with a cup of Venusian coffee, which was strong and cardamon-flavored. "No, my dear," he said. "You're wrong.

I didn't join the police for excitement. Doesn't it seem possible to you that I have a vision of a solar system free of crime, a solar system in which a man could rocket from Mercury to Titan in perfect safety? Perhaps I want to help that vision become a reality."

"Perhaps," Gloria said, yawning. "Is your tour of duty here on Venus part of that vision?"

"Of course. Venusport is a very special place. Oh, not because of the port itself. It's a normal enough coastal city for this waterworld of a planet. But it's the other half of Venusport I'm thinking of. The City of Terror. You've heard of it?"

"Yes, Mark. It's a kind of solar system in miniature, with thieves and cutthroats from all the habitable worlds here."

"It even has its own ruler," Mark said. "It's own royalty. Sounds insane, in the Twenty-fourth Century, but it's a fact. Incidentally, I think you know him."

"I know him? The ruler of the City of Terror? You must be joking."

"No. You knew him on Earth, before we were married." Mark grinned and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I came galloping through the streets of New York on my white charger and took you away from him. Tremaine is his name. Alan Tremaine. You were just a kid then, but you said you were thinking of marrying him, remember? Well, don't you? Gloria, what is it? You look so strange. Is anything the matter, Gloria?"

"No," she said, her voice sounding distant, her knuckles white as she gripped the edge of the table. "No, nothing's the matter. Nothing, Mark. You—you're sure it's Alan? The same Alan Tremaine?"

"Of course I'm sure. Well," Mark said, getting up from the table, "if I don't hurry I'll be late for work. What's for dinner, darling?"

She told him mechanically. She let him kiss her cheek again as he left the apartment in the uniform of an Inspector of Police. He was a fine, handsome figure of a man in his middle thirties, she thought. It seemed a paradox, though, for while his profession was one in which excitement should have been almost commonplace, she craved it more than he did.

I'm still young, she thought. I'm still in my twenties. Men think I'm beautiful. Men—Alan thought so. Alan. . . . He was here, here in Venusport.

Through the gate, in the City of Terror. She merely had to walk into the hot, wet street, find a coptercab, take it to the City—and Alan . . .

Five years. Had he changed? He was less reckless, she thought. Five years would mellow a man. But still, Alan Tremaine. The memory of him made her almost giddy. Tremaine, whose strong arms had held her, who had whispered words of love in her ear, who had trained to be an astrogator but who had turned to crime after she had married Mark Hadley so suddenly. No! she thought with mounting irritation. That wasn't the reason. It couldn't be; we are only kids. It was in Alan Tremaine all the time, that incident merely brought it out. I wonder what he looks like now. I wonder . . .

An hour later she went downstairs. It was raining. It rained every day of the year on Venus, for an hour or so. It was hot every day of the year. It was so hot and so damp that leather shoes and accessories were covered with thick evil-smelling green mould in a matter of days. It was so hot that the native Venusians wore far less clothing than would be acceptable on Earth, the women frequently going about bare to the waist. Gloria joined the throngs of Venusian shoppers in the street, listening to the noises and seeing the sights and smelling the smells of a place which, for her, was still new, still exotic. Overhead, the perpetual Venusian cloud blanket was dazzling white. You had to watch it, Mark had said. The sun never shined directly on Venus, but could still give you a severe burn.

She was aware of the eyes of most of the native males on her as she headed for the corner. Emotionally she was indifferent to their attention, but liked it rationally. She saw a coptercab on the corner, its rotors idling slowly, fanning the sultry air. She lifted a slim hand and signaled it. The driver had the rear door open by the time she reached it. He was a very small, very thin man with an enormous Adam's apple. A Venusian. She did not know it, but his name was Dowser.

"Where to?" he said.

She settled herself comfortably against the cushions. She felt a single bead of sweat trickle down her side from her armpit. It felt cold. "The City of Terror," she said. "If you know where Alan Tremaine lives there?"

"I do, I sure do," Dowser said, and looked at her appraisingly.

The Martian, who was very drunk, was a newcomer in the City of Terror. He still insisted on calling it merely the Native Quarter, which was his first mistake. Its denizens had a pride in their designation. They had fought for it and they had earned it. Justifiably or not, they were proud of it. His second mistake was coming to the Cafe of Everlasting Passion, watching the native dancers and declaring he had seen better on Mars or any of the Jovian Moons. His third mistake was saying, within earshot of a Venusian-Martian halfbreed girl named Parilla, that it was a mistake for the citizens of the Native Quarter or the City of Terror or whatever they chose to call their town, to place their leader Alan Tremaine on a kind of pedestal, pay tribute to him, consider him almost a god.

Parilla said nothing at first. She listened in angry silence. The Martian was a short, plump young man with the almost beardless face of his kind. Parilla looked at him contemptuously, but her anger grew when no one in the cafe contradicted him. She was an extremely pretty girl with dark skin, dark hair and a sleek figure under the native halter and shorts. When she moved she did so lithely and athletically but she had never considered herself pretty until Alan Tremaine had met her. Everything had changed then for Parilla. She had been what on Earth they call a tomboy and on the outworlds, where tomboys do not merely play baseball or beat the neighborhood boys at tennis, a spitfire. But since Tremaine's coming, she had tried to change her ways, and some of the older denizens of the City smiled when they saw Parilla with the loot of some confidence game, shop at the fashionable shops of Venusport itself for some of her clothing.

The Martian told the barman, "O.K., if you push me like that, I'll say it. This Tremaine must have been lucky, that's all. Put anyone else in his position, and the results would be the same. You people were looking for a leader, that's all. Tremaine happened to be it. You think that Tremaine's something special? Don't make me laugh. Hell, it could have been anyone—it could have been me, Borr Bentley. You think I'm kidding?"

"I think you're crazy to talk like that in here," the barman said. "Me, I'm neutral. Tremaine never did me any harm. Everybody likes Tremaine, but you—"

Borr Bentley sneered. "You are all afraid of him, is what I mean. Why, on Mars—"

"Then why," Parilla suggested, finally coming over to his table, "don't you go back to Mars?"

Without looking up, Borr said, "Who the hell asked you?" When he looked up, his tone changed. His eyes opened wider and he declared: "Well, this is different. This I like. Why didn't someone tell me there were things like this in the native quarter?"

"I said, why don't you go back to Mars?"

"Sister, I was almost going to. But not now. Sit down, huh?"

Parilla sat down. She smiled at him sweetly. "Say again what you said before."

"About going back to Mars?"

"About Tremaine, if you dare."

"I said Tremaine was lucky. I said he wasn't anything special. I said—"

Her hand streaked across the table and slapped him. "Tremaine is too busy to bother with you," she said, "otherwise you would get more than this." She brought her other hand around lithely, the motion so fast it was blurred. Instinctively, Borr Bentley ducked back away from the blow. The combination of his own motion and Parilla's hard, open-palmed slap tumbled him from his chair. He landed heavily on his back and got to his feet cursing. He grabbed Parilla's left wrist and pulled her toward him, but with her right hand she slammed his wine bottle down on the edge of the table, shattering it and holding the jagged neck in her fist.

"Leave go of my hand," she said. He did so. His face was livid. "Get out of here," she said.

He turned around. He looked at her. "I'll be back," he promised.

The barman laughed and said, "I'll bet you won't. You are lucky Parilla won't be able to follow you, pal. Like most of the folks in here, she's wanted by some tough people outside."

Borr Bentley grinned when he heard this. He said nothing, but strode from the Cafe of Everlasting Passion. The barman gave Parilla a glass of wine, which she did not

drink. "Why didn't *you* say anything?" she asked him in a tight voice.

"You know me. Just a barman. A barman's supposed to be neutral and only listen—up to a point."

"I thought he passed that point," Parilla said, still angry, her cheeks still flushed, her high pointed breasts heaving. Then, all at once, she shut her eyes tightly and drank the wine. Once, long ago, it seemed, she had killed a man. It had been in self-defense. The man was drunk, had attacked her. But he was a Martian tourist and the words of Martian tourists go further than those of a denizen of Venusport. The police had sought her, so she had fled to the City of Terror. It was not a City of Terror for her, Parilla thought. Because Tremaine was there. Tremaine—her protector. She smiled, thinking of what he would say when she told him all about the Martian, Borr Bentley.

"Are you with the tour?" the fat guide asked the beautiful Earth woman.

"Oh, no. I'm looking for a place called the Cafe of Everlasting Passion. What a name! I'm looking for Mr. Tremaine."

"You know him?" Faqs asked.

"Yes, I knew him once."

"I can find him for you."

"I'd rather you didn't. It's a surprise. I'd rather you just told me where I could find him."

Shrugging, fat Faqs did so. After she had gone, Dowser tapped Faqs' beefy shoulder. "You know who that was?" Dowser asked the big Venusian.

"No. Who?"

"Mrs. Mark Hadley. The wife of the new Police Inspector. What do you think of that?"

"I don't like it," Faqs said at once.

"Hello," Gloria said.

Tremaine looked at her and felt the years roll off like water. Suddenly, for the first time, the five years in the City of Terror seemd like an interlude. "You have not changed," he said. "You're as beautiful as ever."

"Thank you, Alan."

They looked at each other in silence. He had an impulse to kiss her, but did not. He said, "I hear you're here with the Inspector."

"But of course."

"Are you still looking for excitement?"

"You and Mark were the

only ones who ever put it into words like that. Yes. Yes, I am. It isn't very civilized, is it? If—if there's enough excitement, I don't even mind to see blood spilled . . ."

"I'm supposed to be the same way."

"But you're not, are you? Mark is supposed to be that way, too. It's a legend built around both of you, but it's not true. Mark would be a pipe-and-slipper man if he could. And you, Alan? What about you?"

"I like it fine here in the City of Terror."

"Look at me. You could never lie to me, you know. Five years haven't changed that."

"Why shouldn't I like it? The name is just that, a name. It hasn't been the City of Terror for me."

"But it's been a prison. Hasn't it? What would happen if you left here? How far would you get? Probably, they are waiting right outside the gates for you."

Tremaine stood up and poured drinks for both of them. "Why did you come here?" he said.

"Because I heard you were here, of course. Because I thought it would be exciting, seeing you."

"How would it look for your husband? Now that he's here, his arch enemy is Alan Tremaine. I'm why Inspectors never hold their jobs long in Venusport, Gloria. Because I'm right under their noses and they can't get me. The politicians don't like that."

Gloria looked at him appraisingly. "It must be very thrilling," she said.

He looked at her, at the eyes slitted now in the beautiful face, at the nervous hands on the table, at the faintest suggestion of a mocking smile on her face. In the five years, he had forgotten that part of her, the fantastic striving for excitement, the craving for it which paled all other cravings within her. But he could see it now and it was most important and it made him compare this girl in front of him with Parilla and the half-breed woman did not come off second best.

"The thing I can't figure out," Gloria was saying, "is this: why doesn't an Inspector like my husband just come in here and get you?"

Tremaine shrugged. "Maybe some day he will, but the reason the odds will be against him is easy. There are a hundred thousand people in here who say he won't."

Gloria said, as if to herself, "And Mark is so quiet about

it, so indifferent, as if the excitement of the chase meant nothing to him . . ."

Tremaine walked to the door. Suddenly, he was very glad Gloria had come. There would be no more looking backward for him. He had made a mess of his life and there was no backing down from that, but he wouldn't turn to his past with either wistfulness or self-pity. For five years he had been deluding himself. "Well," he said, "I hope you've satisfied your curiosity coming here." He opened the door.

"Alan! Won't I see you again?"

He shrugged. He said nothing. He stood there, waiting. She bit her lip and left the room. Tremaine stood at the door, watching her. She entered the main room of the Cafe of Everlasting Passion and sat at the bar for a drink, a spoiled girl who had not outgrown her childhood predilection for playing games. Perhaps he hadn't been entirely fair, Tremaine thought. Perhaps he ought to have one more drink with her, for old time's sake. He left his private room in the rear of the cafe.

Parilla, who slept afternoons because she sang at night in the Cafe of Everlasting Passion, was awakened by a knocking at her door. She got up drowsily, went to the door and mumbled, "Who is it? Can't a girl get some sleep around here?"

"Message from Tremaine," a voice whispered.

Parilla withdrew the bolt and stepped back into the room, which, with heavy drapes drawn across the single window, was quite dark. "I—I don't recognize you," she said.

"No? Look closer, sister."

"Why, you—you're—"

He clapped his hand over her mouth before she could call out. He spun her lithe body around and got a throttle hold on her neck. She fought him like a wildcat but could not match his strength. When she subsided, s l u m p i n g against him, Borr Bentley called softly into the hallway. "O.K., you guys. Bring in the box."

Ten minutes later, a delivery copter with the name of one of Venusport's leading stores painted on its side could be seen speeding from the City of Terror, its rotors flashing as it rose from the ground.

"I'll be frank, Mr. Bentley," Mark Hadley said. "I don't

like anything about you. I don't like the way you operate. I don't like the plan you've proposed. I don't like—"

"You are breaking my heart," Borr Bentley said. "Either you're interested in the deal, or you ain't."

"I'm a policeman," Hadley sighed. "I have to be interested. What's your price?"

"Why, no price at all," Borr Bentley said in a friendly voice. "It's gratis, Inspector. I'm just doing my duty as a citizen."

"Do you call kidnaping doing your duty?"

"Kidnaping? That's a hard word, Inspector. I deliver to you a girl who's wanted for murder. Is that kidnaping?"

Hadley said nothing.

"I'll tell you. It ain't kidnaping. But it's bait, Inspector. Don't you see how it's bait? With this girl Parilla in your possession, Alan Tremaine ought to come busting out of his stronghold. The City of Terror is gonna lose its most famous citizen, unless I miss my guess."

"Do you mind telling me why you're doing it?"

Borr Bentley grinned. "Why should I mind?" he said. "I'll tell you why. I'm doing it because a new guy don't have a chance in the City of Terror with Tremaine around. I'm doing it because with Tremaine there's room for only one big shot in there. That's why I'm doing it. You understand?"

"You're practically broadcasting the fact that you—"

"That I'm a criminal? I haven't done anything on Venus, yet. When I do, Inspector—if I do—you won't be able to do a thing about it. Now, are we in business or aren't we?"

"Where's the girl Parilla?" Inspector Hadley said wearily.

"Now you're talking, pal."

"Just answer my question."

"O.K., O.K. Come on with me."

As they entered the squad room, Inspector Hadley spoke to a sergeant of police. "Sergeant Kamor," he said, "outside at the copter circle is a cabman who calls himself Dowser. He's a go-between for Tremaine and his bunch inside the City. Send him in here, please."

The sergeant saluted and disappeared outside. Five minutes later, a reluctant Dowser came into the squad room. "You've got nothing on me," he said.

At any other time, Inspector Hadley would have been amused. Dowser had thought his role as go-between was a

well-kept secret, but actually the police had been watching him for some time. Little Dowser, the Inspector thought, was going to be a mighty careful man—and a frightened one—after this.

"Listen, Dowser," he said. "We know all about you. Don't get scared, because we have nothing specific on you—now. We want you to deliver a message for us."

"What kind of message?" Dowser's courage waxed again. His voice was almost arrogant.

"To Alan Tremaine."

"What makes you think I know Tremaine."

The Inspector ignored him. "Tell Tremaine we have his girl friend. Tell him we have Parilla. Tell him she's being kept at the Venusport House of Detention, pending trial. Have you got the message straight?"

Little Dowser's face was suddenly very white and grim. "Yeah," he said. "I got the message. I'll deliver it."

"Good," Borr Bentley said.

Inspector Hadley turned away. The bait, from what he had heard, was probably strong enough. But he would not be able to look into a mirror for a long time.

"I swear it's the truth, Tremaine," Dowser said. "That's what he told me. The Inspector."

"You saw Parilla?" Tremaine demanded, grabbing the small man's blouse and drawing him up on his toes.

"Hey, lay off, willya? It wasn't my idea. I didn't take her."

"Who did—assuming they have her?"

"A guy named Borr Bentley. A Martian."

The barman at the Cafe of Everlasting Passion had told Tremaine of the incident with the Martian Bentley. He'd get Bentley, he thought now. He'd make Bentley pay. Then he smiled grimly. Bentley didn't matter now. Parilla mattered. Bentley could wait.

"What else did the Inspector say?" Tremaine asked little Dowser.

"He didn't have to say nothing. It was in his face. He was thinking he could use Parilla to get you. Like a flame draws a moth, you know. He wants you to leave the City of Terror. When you leave, he's got you."

"Yeah," Tremaine said.

"Don't be a fool!" Dowser pleaded. "Please, Mr. Tremaine. Maybe according to the legal eagles around here you ain't exactly a law-abiding citizen, but you done a lot

for the City. If you leave, if they ever catch you, everything will fall apart in here. It really used to be the City of Terror. You know how it was before you came. You remember. An outsider couldn't even walk on the streets without being afraid he was gonna get his throat cut. Now they take regular guided tours through here, Mr. Tremaine. It's you. You made it safe. You—"

"Organized crime," Tremaine snapped. "It's the only way to operate. You should know that."

"Come off it," Dowser said. "You talk tough, but you know something? I think you got a soft spot for the little people inside you somewhere. Don't look at me like that, Mr. Tremaine. It's the truth. Don't you think some of the earlier police Inspectors could have pulled a copter raid on the City and taken you? Like a commando raid back on Earth in the old days, you know. But they didn't. You know why they didn't? Because unless they can clean up the City of Terror completely—which ain't possible—they're better off with you than without you. For God's sake, Mr. Tremaine, I'm begging you. For all the little people. Don't force the new Inspector's hand. Don't go out there. Don't, Mr. Tremaine."

Gloria Hadley, who had been sitting next to Tremaine at the bar, smiled. "You're quite a legend around here, aren't you?"

Legend, he thought. Thrills. Excitement. She's like a small child. But Parilla—

"I'll be back," he told Dowser.

Outside, the glaring white sky wrung itself out like a sodden washrag, drenching the muddy streets of the City of Terror. It was only four blocks to Parilla's lodging house, and Tremaine ran all the way, ignoring the shouts of greeting he encountered wherever people clustered, going about their business despite the daily downpour.

He climbed the stairs three at a time, pounded on Parilla's door. There was no answer, but the door was not locked. Perhaps Dowser had meant well, but had heard only rumor hearsay . . .

He opened the door and saw the shambles inside Parilla's small furnished apartment. A chair, wicker and light wood, was broken. A larger chair was overturned. Broken crockery was on the floor. Parilla's bed was rumpled, as if she had got out of it hur-

riedly, had not returned to make it . . .

Fists clenched at his sides, Tremaine turned to the door. Panting and disheveled, Gloria was waiting there for him. "I couldn't help following you," she said. "Listen, Alan. I heard everything. You'd be making a mistake if you went out there after her. What does one girl matter? What—"

"This is a change of heart for you," he said coldly. "Isn't it?"

"I don't want to see you captured. I don't want you to spend the rest of your life in some stinking Venusian prison. Alan, don't go. What can that girl do for you that—that—"

"That a million others can't do? Is that what you're trying to say? You don't understand, Gloria. I almost feel sorry for you. She's something special . . ."

"No, you fool! Oh, you fool. That isn't what I was going to say. What can she give you? What can any girl give you that—that I can't give you—?"

All at once her lips found his, fiercely, clingingly. "Alan! Oh, Alan . . ." Her arms circled his back, her fine body pressed against his, seeking, demanding.

He drew away slowly. He looked at her face, which had gone slack. She had not done it for the lost years. It had nothing to do with the lost years. It was because she had once found him attractive and still found him attractive to her—and exciting. He said, without expression, "Go back to Mark, Gloria. It's the best thing for you."

"And you? Tell me, Alan. What's the best thing for you?"

"I'm going after Parilla."

"When I offer you my kisses?" she whispered. It was a low sound, barely audible. He said nothing. He stood there and let her slap his face. It was better that way, he thought. He watched her turn, biting her lip, and hurry downstairs. He waited until the sound of her footsteps faded away. Then he went down to the street himself.

It was still raining steadily.

An hour later, Tremaine told Faqs, the fat Venusian tourist guide, "You don't have to do it, remember that. I'll understand perfectly if you refuse."

Faqs laughed. "Ask anyone, Tremaine. Would anyone here in the City refuse you at a time like this? I'll do it."

"Thank you," Tremaine

said simply. Then: "But what about your brother?"

"What I tell him to do, Gann Lakor does," Faqs insisted.

"But he's in the House of Detention. Can you get a message through to him?"

Faqs laughed again, his many chins jiggling. "There are ways. He will have your message within the hour, this you can take with assurance."

Tremaine sighed, stood up. "All right," he said. "Then I'm leaving the City of Terror now."

Faqs poured wine into two glasses. "A drink, my friend," he said. "I toast to your luck, but I drink for more than myself. I drink for everyone who calls the City of Terror his home, all the broken people, the confused people, the mixed-up, the insecure, the criminal, the—"

He had run out of adjectives. He lifted the glass of amber liquid to his fat lips and quenched it at one draught. He pounded Tremaine on the back and said, "And may God go with you . . ."

Now, at last, the City was behind him.

Hunkered down in a voluminous rain cape and hood, he walked through the gate to Venusport—and the outside world. The rain, he knew, was very fortunate. The rain did not stop business in the twin cities, for their citizens were too accustomed to it. But the rain cloaked him in anonymity, because the hundreds of people drifting in either direction through the gate in their big slickers looked more or less alike. The policemen stationed one on either side of the gate hardly gave him a second glance. But he wondered if he would ever see the gate and the City of Terror again.

It had been a prison, he thought, and wondered if man was like that. A prison, until the moment he left, and now, suddenly, he felt a longing for it, for the life he had built himself, for the people who, organized in their own fashion behind him were still criminals but were not as rapacious and violent as they once had been. Criminals? he thought. The only kind of criminal who deserved the name was a moral criminal. He wondered if you could make the distinction. He knew many people inside the City who might spend the remainder of their lives in prison if they were ever caught, but whom he did not regard as criminals. He shrugged.

Venus was a frontier world, and maybe that explained it. Every element, including the criminal, was a necessary feature of the frontier. Roll them all together, magically almost, the soldier of fortune, the glory seeker, the small-time politician, the itinerant preacher, the malcontent, the adventurer, the lost woman, the romantic, the criminal—roll them all together and somehow a new civilization was forged in the furnace of their strife . . .

He walked steadily through the rain, his boots sinking to the ankle in the soft, sloppy mud. What happened to him now was not important. Parilla was important.

He had never seen the Venusian sky so dark as when he reached the House of Detention. For, despite the theories of some early astronomers, one side of Venus—actually about forty percent of its surface if you took the axial wobble into account—never saw night. The gloom now, though, was almost a gloom of night. Generators hummed and throbbed all over the city with unexpected activity. Electric lights probed the dark on all sides of Tremaine. Across the street from the House of Detention, he waited. He looked at his wristwatch and took a deep breath, wondering about Faqs' brother. If the Venusian failed him . . .

But then, wonderfully and unmistakably, he heard the sound of the riot whistle from within the gray walls of the House of Detention. Outside, several police copters were idling, and Tremaine smiled. He had been expected. They were waiting for him, of course. But if the riot signal drew their attention within the building long enough, if Faqs' brother, who held sway over many of the prisoners within the gaunt fortress, could keep them rioting . . .

Tremaine waited until every policeman on the street in front of the House of Detention rushed inside. Then, slowly, he crossed through the mud.

"What the hell do they want, Sergeant?" Inspector Hadley shouted.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but you can never tell *what* they want. They're yelling. They refused to return to the cell block. They're in the dining room now."

"Have they barricaded the door? We'll have to force it."

"No, sir. That's the funny part of it. They haven't barricaded the door. It's almost

like—well, like they're inviting us inside to break up the riot. I never saw anything like it before, sir."

If anything, the din had increased in volume in the past few minutes. Guards were rushing back and forth impotently, shouting meaningless orders, cursing, bringing arms from the storeroom. They needed leadership and, with the chief of police on an inspection tour of the frontier settlements a hundred miles from Venusport, they turned to Inspector Hadley.

"It's a trick," Borr Bentley said. "It's a trick, Inspector. They got organization, don't you see? It's Tremaine. It's got to be Tremaine."

"He wouldn't dare coming in here."

"Are you crazy? It's what we were hoping he'd do all along, isn't it? Well, isn't it?"

"Sergeant," Inspector Hadley said, turning away from the Martian, "I want you to—"

"Inspector!" Borr Bentley cried, "you've got to listen to me. Sure, I care about Tremaine. I want to get Tremaine. But I'm scared, too. I can't help it if I'm scared. You've got to believe all this is organized. You've got to believe—"

Just then a guard rushed in. "They're breaking out of the dining hall!" he shouted. "They're heading for the power plant, sir. We tried to stop them. We can't . . ."

As if his words were responsible, the lights winked out. Within the gloomy fortress, it was almost entirely dark.

"You've got to protect me," Borr Bentley wailed. "You agreed to help me. You—"

But they weren't listening to him.

"Quit shoving," the guard said.

"I'm sorry," Tremaine told him. In the darkness, Tremaine had struck the man accidentally.

"Hey, who are you? It ain't so dark I can't see you're not wearing a uniform."

"Deputized a few minutes ago," Tremaine numbled.

"Yeah? Let me see your deputy's card."

Tremaine hit him, ruthlessly and efficiently. He felt the thudding contact of the blow, felt his arm go numb almost to the elbow. But the guard fell heavily. Tremaine bent over him, found his electronic key-ray, pocketed it and went in search of the woman's wing of the House of Detention. He wondered how long Faqs' brother could keep the genera-

tor out of commission. If the lights went on now . . . but Tremaine couldn't stop to think of that. All he could do was hurry—

Ahead of him, women's voices were shrill and hysterical. He heard a matron, deeper-voiced but nervous, shouting something. He walked on. When he reached the bars which closed off the cell-block, he called in an authoritative voice for the matron. He inserted the key-ray and had the gate open before she reached it. "Parilla," he said, leveling an electronic pistol at the matron.

"You're Tremaine!" she cried.

And the lights went on.

Inspector Hadley led half a dozen men down the corridor toward the woman's wing of the House of Detention. The meaningless prison riot had been quelled finally, resistance fading to nothing once the guard had finally broken into the generator room. There had apparently been no ring-leader. The prisoners would be put on minimum rations for a week and would miss their yard-time, but no one would be punished. There was no one to be punished, unless punishment could be met to the entire convict body . . .

"You're Tremaine!" the matron cried from ahead of them.

Borr Bentley, who was sprinting down the corridor with the guards because he thought they could protect him, was trembling with fear. It had seemed a good idea at first. It did not seem like a good idea now. He wished he was back on Mars, where the sun was small and pale but always shone in the deep blue-black sky; not on Venus, where the sun never broke through the cloud blanket and a man could fear for his life even amidst the police of the planet's largest city.

Abruptly, he saw Tremaine and the girl Parilla coming down the corridor toward them, running. He smiled. Instantly, e v e r y t h i n g was changed again. Now he had nothing to fear. Tremaine was sprinting right into their hands.

"Stop, Tremaine!" Inspector Hadley cried. "We've got you now. Don't come any closer."

Yes, Borr Bentley thought, they had him. There was no escape for Alan Tremaine now. And with very little effort—and almost no danger, he, Borr Bentley, could make a hero of himself. He watched the police draw their hand

weapons. He advanced confidently through their ranks.

"Oh, Alan," Parilla whispered as the police approached. "I wasn't worth it. You shouldn't have come."

He ignored her. He called out: "Do you know what will happen in the City of Terror if you take me?"

"We'll worry about that," Inspector Hadley said. "Throw down your weapon, Tremaine . . . Bentley! What are you doing? Bentley, stop!"

The Martian moved through the ranks of police and headed for Tremaine and the girl. Tremaine raised the electronic pistol. He would try a bluff, one bluff, and then surrender, because he couldn't bring himself to fire on the police and get Parilla in the crossfire.

"Give it to me," Borr Bentley said. "Give me the gun, Tremaine. I'm taking you."

Wearily, Tremaine lowered his weapon. Ahead of him, there was a blinding flash of light in the corridor as one of the policemen, mistaking his gesture, fired.

Borr Bentley caught the lethal electronic charge in the small of his back. In the confusion which followed—which would last seconds and no more, Tremaine wheeled around with Parilla and shoved her ahead of him back through the women's wing of the House of Detention. Electronic rays seared the air over their heads, but by then they were plunging through the rear entrance of the fortress, and outside to the darkness of the street. Footsteps pounded behind them, but the women convicts closed ranks stolidly, as if one mind controlled all their bodies. It took several seconds for the police to fight their way through, but the delay had not been necessary. For Tremaine and Parilla were outside and the final cog in Tremaine's plan fell into place.

"Taxi, mister?" Dowser called happily from the window of his hovering copter cab. He was grinning from ear to ear. In a moment, Tremaine and Parilla were flashing back to the safety of the City of Terror. It was a pretty wonderful place, Tremaine was thinking. He would never think of it as a prison again.

"Take it easy, Inspector," the sergeant said.

"But we let him slip right through our fingers," Mark Hadley groaned.

"It's something all the Inspectors learn around here, sir, sooner or later. You can't

(Concluded on page 95)

MIND BET

By GEORGE JULIUS

Now and then you read a story in the paper about a completely senseless murder. For example, say a man is out for a walk when a shot rings out, leaving the police with the lifeless body of an innocent victim—"not an enemy in the world, officer"—on their hands. So they call it a case of mistaken identity and let it go at that.

But is it that simple? Maybe it's not a mistake. Maybe it's not even an identity!

PALE gray rain added melodramatic veneer to the scene as an attendant draped a blanket over the body. A companion helped him lift it through the ambulance door.

"First murder in three months," Detective-Lieutenant Bolling said. "I guess we've been lucky. Sure you didn't see anyone, Carl?"

"No," Morgan lied. "I was around the corner when I heard the shots. Who was he?"

Bolling opened the man's wallet again. "William M. Lowry, an insurance salesman from Pittsburgh. I can tell you more tomorrow. You'll have to sign a statement."

"All right," Morgan said. "I'll see you sometime tomorrow morning."

He lit a cigarette and continued his walk along the deserted post-midnight street. He was only a few feet from the small red neon sign of *Mickey's Bar* when the siren of the police ambulance began its sometimes-premature dirge.

The room was apparently empty of customers. Sid, the bartender, waved casually as Morgan entered. "A little late tonight, Mr. Morgan."

Under the scorching ray from the tube, the man slumped forward.

"Uh-huh," Morgan agreed. "Can I use your phone?"

He relayed the details of the shooting to his newspaper then strolled into the darkened rear section of the bar. Ed Lindsay sat in the last booth. The bottle of Scotch before him was half empty.

Lindsay's hazy black eyes examined Morgan for a moment. His thin face was twisted by indecipherable emotion.

"Hello, Carl. Looks like we've got the place to ourselves."

"I saw you kill that man," Morgan said.

Lindsay smiled lopsidedly. "Thought that was you at the corner. Did you tell the police?"

"No. I wanted to hear your reasons first."

Lindsay gestured toward the opposite seat. Morgan sat down. He wasn't surprised to see an extra glass.

"You knew I'd show up here?"

"I guessed," Lindsay said. "We've been friends a long time."

Morgan suddenly recalled their accidental first meeting, eight years before in this same bar. Both had been newcomers to the town, without contacts or finances. Lindsay was now head chemist of a nearby drug plant, while he still held a sixty-per-week reporter's job. Despite these and other personal distinctions, they had remained close friends.

Lindsay finished his drink. "I had to do it, Carl. He was sent here to kill me."

"By whom?"

"The Telepaths. They're still after me. Always will be."

"Who are the Telepaths?" Morgan asked.

"You couldn't understand."

Morgan leaped up. "Cut out the clichés!" he snarled. "You just fired four bullets into another human being and I'm already an accessory after the fact! Are you going to tell me about it or do I call the cops?"

"I'll try," Lindsay said, "but I don't think you'll believe me. Doesn't matter since I'll be leaving tonight in any case. Do you know where I'm from, Carl?"

"Seattle, isn't it?"

"A lie on my part I'm afraid. I came from—" He broke off and chuckled. "I've been behaving like a Terrestial so long I even sound absurd to myself. I came from another Solar System of this supposedly infinite universe. There!"

Lindsay's oversized eyes were now clear and scrutiniz-

ing. Morgan, looking away from their ebon glare, wondered whether his friend were drunk or mad. For the first time fear intermingled with his confusion.

"Do you still have the gun?"

"It's in my pocket. No shells left, though."

Morgan hesitated, then asked: "What planet did you say you were from?"

He remembered past conversations with Lindsay's coworkers, their descriptions of sullen moodiness he had never witnessed. *The most brilliant guy I've ever met,* one had said, *but different. Too damned different for me.*

Lindsay poured another three fingers of whiskey and gulped it down. "There's no Terrestial equivalent for the name of my home world. Like the expression *Earth,* it originally represented all of creation. Rather silly.

"Our lives weren't particularly unlike yours here. We were more advanced, of course, socially as well as scientifically. War, poverty, and disease abolished in the finest Utopian tradition. Until the Telepaths came.

"They stemmed racially from our own people, colonists of a distant planet isolated except for minor trade. Somehow, in a few hundred years, they developed along radical genetic lines, chiefly in acquiring telepathic communicative powers. Every other way they were our inferiors. Even our studies of mental phenomena were, paradoxically, centuries ahead of their own. All they had were obsolete aggressive instincts and a trick of nature. Enough, unfortunately.

"The Telepaths swept over our civilization. We were unprepared for war, especially against an enemy able to probe our minds and counteract a defensive gesture before we made it. 'Utopia' under the freaks. It's a familiar-enough situation even here on Terra.

"About a dozen of us—the bright young men of that section of the galaxy—escaped. We were going to establish a counter-revolutionary movement."

Lindsay again laughed sardonically and rumpled his graying hair. "They came after us. My compatriots may all be dead by now—I don't know. This planet of yours is my seventh hiding place. The other night—I spent a lot of time examining the sky—I saw an excessively bright 'meteor flash.' It only took

the Telepath a few days to stalk my mental spoor, so to speak.

"Now," Lindsay concluded, "do you believe all that?"

"You mean this guy sifted your thoughts out of everybody's on Earth?"

Lindsay nodded.

"Then how did you manage to jump him?"

"There are psychological controls you can use to temporarily sidetrack a Telepath, a sort of self-hypnosis that blurs your thought patterns enough to make instant identification impossible. I'd seen him around the plant area and tonight when—"

"I don't think you were so lucky," Morgan interrupted, trying to conceal the mixture of pity and near-panic that now motivated him. "I think you made a mistake and killed a Pittsburgh insurance-man named William Lowry. Do you have a permit for that gun?"

"Yes."

"We'd better call the police. They'll know you did it by morning."

"I'll be gone," Lindsay declared.

After a moment's silence, Morgan hazarded, "You're sick, Ed. Let me phone Bolling. They'll treat you okay. My paper has a lot of influence. I'll see you're not harmed in—"

"You're right, Carl," Lindsay whispered. "I did kill the wrong one."

At the sight of his friend's suddenly ashen face, Morgan twisted about. A man stood a few yards from their booth. Outlined against the light from the bar, he was a shapeless black hulk. His right hand lifted, pointing a narrow metal rod at Lindsay. It emitted a barely perceptible red gleam. Lindsay's arm splintered his glass as he slumped forward on the table.

Be still, young man, a voiceless impulse commanded in Morgan's brain.

Disobeying, Morgan grasped his friend's wrist. He felt two pulsebeats, then stillness.

And Carl Morgan knew who he himself was!

He remembered the discovery of a suitable Earthman, intelligent and without any friends or relatives; the hypnotic transference of their surface identities and recollections; the misty sliding-away of his own personality, lost in his subconscious but psychically linked to the other man with death as the only release.

Before the Telepath fully

understood the new images stabbing into his brain, Morgan had scrambled from the booth. One hand seized the assassin's throat, the other wrenched away the silent weapon.

The Telepath pleaded aloud in their home tongue.

"You people were always stupid," Morgan muttered as he increased the pressure.

A moment later he passed the bartender, asleep on his corner stool. He threw down most of his money and climbed the three steps to the door.

It had stopped raining but an unseasonal chill now eddied through the streets. Pulling his collar close, he thought of the dead Earthman who had initially been his decoy and warning device and later his friend. He repressed a bitter Terrestrial oath.

In a few hours he would be back in his spaceship, hidden for eight years. He glanced at the still-overcast sky and beyond to a dark universe of flight and evasion.

"Someday I'll go back home," he said to himself without conviction. He lit another cigarette and proceeded faster along the damp sidewalk.

THE END

THE SORE SPOT

(Concluded from page 89)

catch Tremaine, and you shouldn't try."

"Shouldn't try? He's a criminal!"

"Is he? In the confusion back there he could have fired, couldn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"Guys like you bring law and order to Venus, sir. And guys like me, in my own small way. But I've been here a long time. I know what it's like without Tremaine. I remember what the old days were like."

"You mean he actually helps?"

"Unofficially, sir. Entirely unofficially. All the police on Venus weren't able to handle the City of Terror before Tremaine came. Now they don't have to. Now Tremaine has tamed the place."

Inspector Hadley didn't answer. He wouldn't be able to talk about it for a while, he knew. For a long while. His pride was hurt. But he knew Venus had much to be thankful for in Alan Tremaine.

THE END

LEAVE IT TO UMPAX

By ERIC DEAN.

His mother was a Halcrynon; his father from County Cork. With a combination like that you're going to get something pretty unusual.

That was Umpax—a polite young man who deliberately gave the impression of not being quite bright in the head. That's why Tojak the wrestler, isn't around these days...

UMPAX O'TOOL grasped the handle firmly in his small hand and rattled the door furiously until it was opened a crack, sending a shaft of pale yellow light into the snow-filled gloom.

"Be gone!" a loud voice yelled. "You have come to the wrong house."

Umpax O'Tool snuffled with the cold and said, "My nose is blue with freezing, let me in. Besides, this is the only house for a mile in any direction."

"Be gone, I tell you. You're one of them, ain't you?"

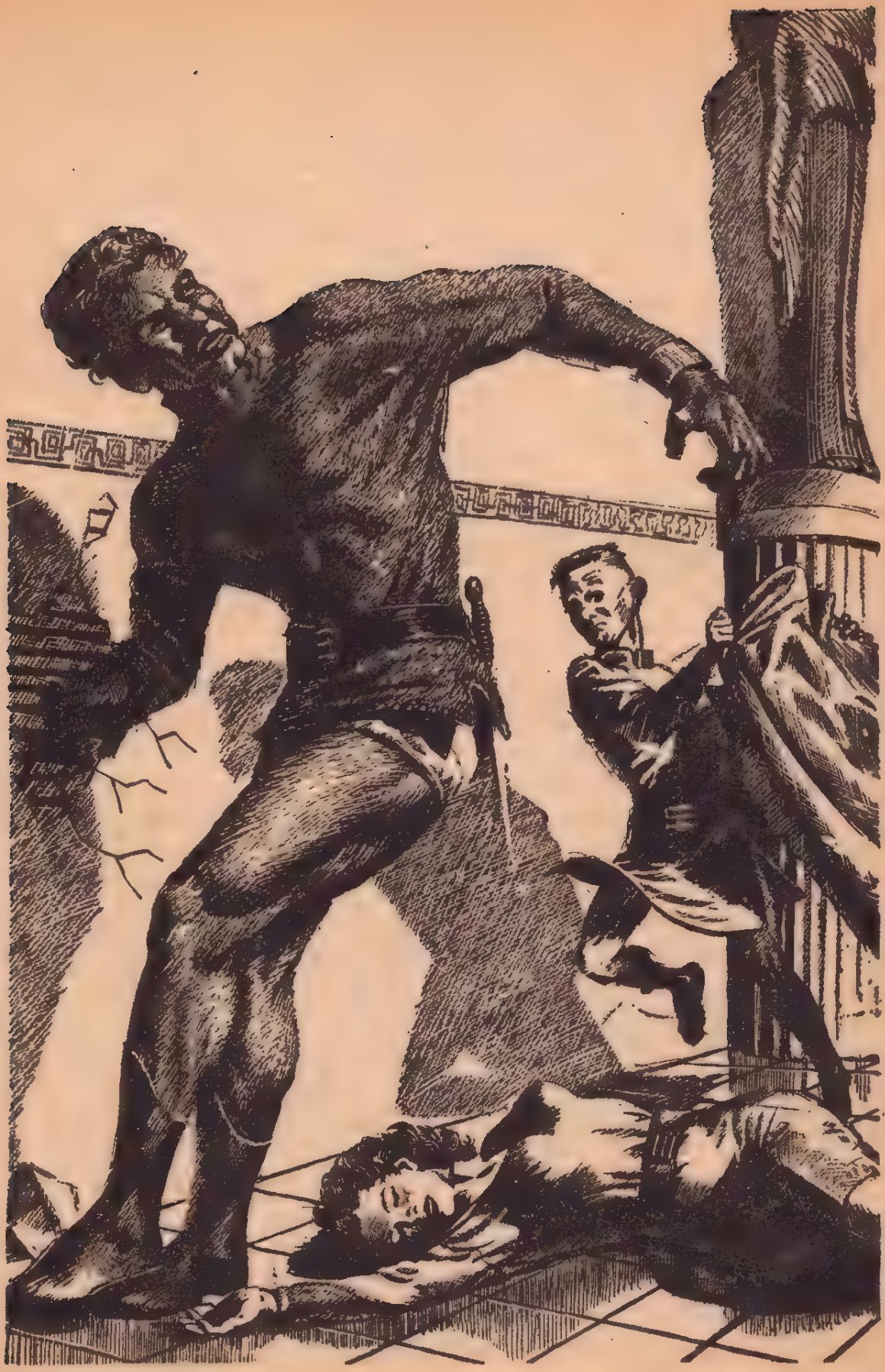
"Look at me," Umpax O'Tool pleaded before the door could be slammed in his face. "I'm a man. Do they send men on their missions? Besides, I have hair as orange as the sunset on Earth."

"A man!" the loud voice guffawed. "You're nothing but a small boy."

"Well," Umpax O'Tool insisted, "at least I am not a woman." He wedged a foot in the door and said, "I've come to help you but I'm frozen half to death. Is this the thanks I get?"

There was a silence inside the rude slab-stone house. After a time, Umpax O'Tool heard hurried whisperings. He beat his small arms against his chest to stop from freezing. He was about to turn away and trudge off through the snow when a voice said distinctly, "Let him come in, Grampa."

"All right, all right," the first voice finally gave in. "But mind you, boy, don't bring



Tojak, bellowing with pain and rage, was helpless.

half the snow of Halcrynon in with you."

The door was opened suddenly. Umpax O'Tool sprang into the warm interior of the house before the Earthmen could change their minds. He walked straight to the fire crackling on the hearth and stood there gratefully. His hair, once the big stocking-hat was removed, seemed to match the color of the dancing flames.

"Will you look at that hair," the old Earthman said. "At least he wasn't lying about that. What is it you want, boy?"

The woman, who was much younger—hardly more than a girl—said, "Give him a chance to thaw out. The poor waif, his teeth are chattering with the cold."

"I am no poor waif," said Umpax O'Tool. "I have come to lead you across Halcrynon to the spaceport and save your lives."

The old Earthman threw back his head and laughed so long and so loud that Umpax O'Tool thought he would strain the arched neck to breaking. Finally, the old Earthman said, "*You?* You're going to save our lives?" He was a tall thin man with a lined, weather-beaten face and pale blue eyes which had done a lot of smiling over the long stern nose.

"Yes," said Umpax O'Tool. "I read all about you in the Halcrynon *City Post*. Because there was no one else, I came to help you."

"Why?" said the girl. "Who are you?"

"I," he said proudly, removing his threadbare mackinaw and stretching himself up to his full height, which was just under five feet, "am Umpax O'Tool. My mother was a Halcrynonian but my father was an Earthman. They're both dead now. My father always used to talk about a town called Dublin."

"Dublin, you say?" the old man asked incredulously. "Dublin, in Ireland? On Earth?"

"Eire, he said," Umpax O'Tool explained. "Is that the same as Ireland?"

"Never mind for now," the girl said, bringing a wonderfully hot steaming cup of broth toward Umpax O'Tool until its delicious aroma was wafted to him on the slight currents of air in the rude stone-slab house so that he wanted to reach out before it was offered and grab the cup and drink its contents in one gulp. "Would you like some soup, Mr. O'Tool?"

Mr. O'Tool. On Halcrynon, they always called him Umpax the Halfbreed. He took the cup of soup politely and it hurt him to do so but he drank its contents slowly, making a minimum of noise. After all, wasn't he Mr. O'Tool?

"Yes," he said when he had finished. "I read all about you in the paper. You, sir—" addressing the old man "—are Mr. Amos Winkler of the former Earth consulate. And this lovely lady by your side—"

"He's part Irish, sure enough," the girl said. "Will you listen to that blarney!"

"This lovely lady is Terri, your granddaughter. When the last Earthmen left Halcrynon after the Halcrynonian women took over the planet and banned interstellar relations, they forgot about you. It will be a month before space-radio can notify Earth and a month more before an Earth ship can come for you. Meanwhile, the Halcrynonian women, flushed with power after their *coup d'etat*—"

"Those cats!" shrilled Terri angrily. She abruptly ran to the room's one small window and stared out into the night as if there were something out there she wanted very much to see. She sighed and turned away from the dark rectangle of the window, which had frosted over. "Those cats," she said again. "They have taken Jimmy Johnson on some ridiculous spy charges."

"I didn't know that," Umpax O'Tool admitted. He whistled a mournful note but ended it with a cheerful trill. "I thought he was here with you."

Winkler shook his head. "Not any longer, thanks to those Halcrynon she-devils."

"They claim he was spying for Earth," Terri stormed. "But why should Earth want to spy on Halcrynon at all? You don't have anything we want. You lived in perfect harmony with the rest of the stellar system until—"

"Don't look at me," said Umpax. "The women's revolution wasn't my idea."

"But how does a thing like that go and happen?" Winkler wanted to know.

Umpax O'Tool shrugged. His face, which was faintly green-tinted like a true son of Halcrynon under the wild mop of orange hair, became animated. "Sure," he said, "it's a strange thing. How can women take over a world from men? Only on Halcrynon could such a rare thing have happened, I tell you. Only a planet this small, with

a population of five millions and not a dozen more—"

"But what has population got to do with it?" Winkler asked.

"Everything, sir. Everything. If there had been more people on Halcrynon, *all* the men couldn't have decided a few years ago, the way they did, that they were too headstrong, too ready for a fight, too violent and—well, you know. They were afraid they would destroy themselves with their bad tempers, especially since Earth introduced atomic power. So, they destroyed not themselves but all their weapons. They abolished competitive sports and all other forms of masculine activity which lead to aggressiveness and high spirit. They vegetated, sirs. And the women of Halcrynon finally got so bored with their dull mates that they overthrew them (the men offering no resistance since it was against their new policy) and instituted this new government which forbids contact with interstellar aliens."

"Well," said Winkler, "well, I hadn't thought of it that way."

"So here I am," Umpax O'Tool said. "Here to take you back to safety."

"But we can't leave here," Terri told him. Looking closely at her, he could tell she had been crying. And now her lower lip was trembling as she spoke. It looked as though she might begin crying again. Umpax O'Tool hoped not. He never knew what to do although he knew he should do something when a woman cried. Besides, now that they had taken over Halcrynon, women were not supposed to cry.

"Don't you see," Terri went on. "They have Jimmy in the military prison over at Fort Highmount. We don't know what they're going to do with him. We can't leave here without him. We—"

"Do you love him very much?" asked Umpax O'Tool suddenly. He was twelve years old and so could speak brashly about anything that popped into his mind. He always thought adults envied this, but they never came right out and said it.

Terri Winkler's face became almost as red as Umpax's hair. She turned away and faced the window and said, "Yes, oh, yes! But if you see him, don't tell him, because you see although I know he loves me—I just know it! —he never said he does, and while most of the women at

Fort Highmount probably want to try him for treason, there's a blonde-haired hussy there who's had her eye on him ever since the three of us came here for the Earth government to Highmount City. Please don't tell him I love him, Umpax, if you see him."

A dry laugh rasped in Winkler's throat, but then he looked at his granddaughter's face and said, "I'm sorry, Terri. I didn't mean to laugh. But just how is our little friend here going to see your Jimmy?"

"Oh, that," said Umpax O'Tool. "As I have said, I came to rescue you, to return you to the spaceport, where I know a man who still owns his own spaceship because his wife hasn't received her license yet. For a small price, he'll ferry you to Ordway Planet, where you can get a liner to Earth. But, before I take you, I will go to Fort Highmount and rescue your friend."

"Exactly how?" Winkler demanded.

"I don't know how," Umpax said frankly. "But my mother always used to say I was very impulsive and my father used to say I was as Irish as Saint Pat, whatever that is. When I reach Fort Highmount, I will see how."

"That's fantastic!" Winkler snorted. "They'll put you in prison as well."

"Not me," Umpax said. "Who wants to put a small boy in prison?"

"Half an Earthman," Winkler reminded him.

"Yes, half an Earthman. That's the reward I expect, by the way. My parents are dead. I have no family on Halcrynon. If I rescue your friend and lead you all to safety, I want to return to Earth with you."

"It's wonderful to be young," was Amos Winkler's only comment until his granddaughter gave him a severe look, which made him add, "Of course you can come back to Earth with us."

Umpax O'Tool beamed at them, climbed into his mackinaw, wrapped the woolen scarf around his neck, pulled the stocking-hat on over his head and down almost to his eyes. He walked to the door and said, "I'm off for Fort Highmount."

Before he could leave, Terri Winkler skipped across the room to him and kissed his cheek. He opened the door and felt a cold blast of air but thought only of the kiss and for the first time wished he were a full-grown man already.

When he walked a little way and looked back through the snow, he could not see the cheerful yellow light streaming through the frosted-over window of the small stone-slab house.

Three hours later, stiff with cold and numb in all his extremities, Umpax O'Tool approached the guard-post on the steeply climbing road to Fort Highmount. He had decided upon a plan of sorts, but was glad he did not have to tell it to Amos Winkler. For the old man would of a certainty laugh and say it was a small boy's plan, doomed at once to failure.

"Ha-lo!" Umpax hailed the guard-post. A delinquent sentry who had been inside the shack in comparative warmth instead of patrolling her post, came sprinting outside with an Earth-style rifle slung upside-down from her shoulder to keep the snow from its barrel.

"What do you want, boy?" the woman soldier asked.

"I'm looking for a soldier."

"What do I look like?" Umpax could tell his statement angered her because when she asked him this in response she blew a great cloud of vapor into the cold air.

"A woman," he said. He added naively, "you are a woman, aren't you?"

"If that is supposed to be funny—"

"Oh, no, ma'am, I assure you."

"Haven't you heard about the revolution?"

Umpax just looked at her, letting his mouth drop open.

"Well, haven't you?"

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I have been out in the hills hunting—"

"In this weather?"

"Trapping. It is perfect weather for trapping. The cold makes the game drowsy. No, I haven't heard about any revolution," he lied.

The woman, who was a full head taller than Umpax, looked down the length of her nose at him and said, "There has been a revolution, boy. The women have taken Halcrynon over, lock, stock and barrel, as the Earthmen say. Including the Army and everything."

Umpax O'Tool laughed. He hoped it was an annoying sound. He was trying. He said, "I don't believe you. I wasn't aware that All Fool's Day had come around so soon. This is a good joke, but after all, you can't fool me, ma'am. Who ever heard of women taking over the world?"

The woman soldier stamp-

ed her boot-clad foot angrily. "You better believe me, boy!" she ranted. "You better. We can throw you into jail if we want. We can do anything we please. What do you mean by refusing to believe a woman's revolution has wrested control of Halcrynon from the men?"

"Oh, now, really," said Umpax. This was the plan which Amos Winkler would have ridiculed. If everyone considered him a naive boy, Umpax had decided, he might as well play the role to the hilt and put it to work for him.

"You still don't believe me?" the woman soldier demanded. For a moment, Umpax thought she was going to strike him with her big leather-gloved hand.

Umpax O'Tool gave her his version of a horse laugh, which is very much the same on Earth and Halcrynon, despite the twenty-two hundred light years of space which separate them.

"I'll show you," the woman soldier promised. She raised her voice and shouted, "Ho! Corporal of the Guard! Over here!"

A second woman came jogging across the snow toward them. She was younger and better-looking than the first and wore a corporal's circlet on her sleeve.

"This boy refuses to believe there has been a revolution," the first woman soldier said.

The young corporal scowled and recited, "Article Seventeen of the Revolutionary Code: 'all non-conformists and doubters shall be referred immediately to the Intelligence Section of the nearest military post for appropriate action.' You had better come with me, boy."

Umpax O'Tool shrugged and had all he could do to keep from smiling. He went off with the corporal and looked back once to see the long-nosed woman soldier walking her post through the snow. "I still don't believe her," he told the corporal.

"Shut up, boy. Just come with me."

Naturally, Umpax O'Tool was delighted. The Intelligence Section of Fort Highmount would know all about the Earthman Jimmy Johnson.

"Don't you see, ma'am," the pretty blonde Intelligence officer said to the commandant of the Intelligence Section after Umpax had stated his disbelief of the revolution in their presence, "this is a won-

derful opportunity. There are no large cities on Halcrynon. There must be hundreds of people on our planet like this boy. Thousands of them. Thousands of people who have not heard about the revolution yet. We haven't decided what our policy toward them will be yet. We'll now be able to experiment with this one harmless little boy."

"Harmless?" the commandant asked. She was a very old woman with a small shrivelled frame and gray-green skin and a mean drawn pucker of a mouth which revealed toothless gums and an enormous beaked nose which looked like solid bone. "No non-conformist is harmless, Lieutenant. You're trying to tell me the Earth spy is harmless, too."

The pretty blonde girl's green face darkened in the Halcrynonian equivalent of a blush. "Oh, that's different," she insisted, "that's entirely different, ma'am."

"I'll say you think it's different," the hag commandant cackled. "Lieutenant, it's common knowledge here at Fort Highmount that while everyone else wants to put him to death, you want to marry that Earthman spy."

Before the blonde lieutenant could answer, Umpax O'Tool said, "Excuse me, ladies, but now I know you're joking. Before, I just thought you were."

"Yes?" demanded the hag. "How do you know?"

"Because you're talking about killing an Earthman. No one kills an Earthman. The Earthmen are the lords and masters of the whole galactic system."

The hag bared her gums and said, "Put this lunatic child away where he won't bother us, Lieutenant."

"But, ma'am," said the blonde girl, "I think we ought to tell him the whole story of the revolution from start to finish and see his reaction. We can learn how to deal with others who have been out of touch and don't know of the historic event."

"Don't you 'historic event' me, Lieutenant. Next thing you'll be telling me is I was one of the most important cogs in the revolutionary machinery."

"But Commandant Marslak, you were! You are! You—"

"Enough," said the hag, who nevertheless looked pleased. "What is it you want?"

"Let me talk to this boy. Let me take him in charge.

Let me study his reaction and learn how to deal with others like him."

For a long time, Commandant Marslak said nothing. Finally, she smiled toothlessly and said, "All right, Lieutenant Lampir. Request granted. Do you know why?"

"No, ma'am," Lieutenant Lampir retorted.

"Because I want to keep you away from the Earthman. Because if you occupy yourself sufficiently with this boy, we can go ahead with our plans concerning the Earthman without interference from within."

"But Commandant Marslak, I wouldn't interfere. I only want to say—"

"Enough. Request granted. The boy is your responsibility. The Earthman, however, is not."

"Excuse me, ladies," said Umpax, "but are you still making believe you have an Earthman prisoner? I won't be able to believe anything you tell me until I see for myself. And I still think you're joking."

Commandant Marslak clenched her claw-like fists. Lieutenant Lampir hurried Umpax O'Tool from the Commandant's office and said, "Very well, boy. I'll show you."

"I can't wait," Umpax assured her.

At first Umpax O'Tool thought the blonde lieutenant would thrust him into the cell with the Earthman and wait outside in the corridor. Instead, she came in after him and looked at the Earthman, who paced back and forth across the damp stone floor of the cell.

"So you really have an Earthman prisoner," Umpax said.

Lieutenant Lampir ignored him and hovered near the tall handsome Earthman. "Are you all right, Jimmy?" she said. "Do they give you enough to eat? They don't beat you or torture you, do they? Do they permit you outside when the weather is good? You need fresh air. You look so pale, poor thing. . . ."

"Listen, Lampir," the Earthman Johnson said, "I haven't been allowed to contact my friends outside. I can't fight this trumped-up spy-charge alone. If you let me contact them—"

"But it's not necessary," Lampir assured him. "I have influence in Fort Highmount. Much influence. Say the word and I'll tell them I'm willing to make you my spouse, in

which case I believe I can have all charges dropped although you would be released in my custody. I'll treat you well, Jimmy. I promise. I—"

But the Earthman Johnson was not listening to her. He said, "Who's the little imp?"

"I'm no imp," said Umpax, who had always admired Earthmen because his father had been one and as far as he knew he was the only half-breed on Halcrynon.

"Well, I don't know about that," said the Earthman Johnson. "Red hair and green skin. Brother!"

"Please, good sir," said Umpax in his most naive voice. "They are telling me all types of fantastic stories about distaff revolutions and captured Earth spies. I refuse to believe anything further from their lips, although I will believe anything I hear —straight from the horse's mouth."

"That's quite a speech for a young fellow like you," the Earthman Johnson said.

Lampir nodded. "He's a strange one, all right. Jimmy, would you tell him the story of the revolution and what happened afterwards?"

"Well, I don't see why not. I have nothing better to do with my time. Thanks to you."

"Oh, not me," said Lampir. "Agree to marry me and you'll be out of here tomorrow. Otherwise, it's death, I'm afraid."

"Lampir, you're a nice kid —as Halcrynonians go. But did it ever occur to you I don't love you?" the Earthman Johnson said.

"Better tell him of the revolution," Lampir answered in a cold voice.

"Young fellow," the Earthman Johnson began, "a few—"

"Oh, no you don't," Umpax O'Tool said. "Not in front of her. I won't believe it's the truth unless you tell me when we're alone."

The Earthman Johnson looked at Lampir with a grin on his face. Lampir scowled, apparently not liking the idea of leaving the cell. "Oh, very well," she said finally. "I don't see what harm he can do. I'll be outside in the corridor."

"You'll be way down the corridor," Umpax said boldly. "Where you can't influence him in any way. How do I even know he's a real Earthman? Maybe he's got pink pigment on his skin and is disguised. I'll want to see that for myself. I'll—"

"All right, all right!" Lampir cried, losing her patience. "Perhaps Commandant Marslak was right. Make the story

a short one, Jimmy. I'll be down the corridor."

After she had left, the Earthman Johnson said, "Honest, kid, I'm an Earthman."

Umpax raised a finger to his lips for silence and said in a low voice, "I know you're an Earthman. I know all about you. I also know all about the revolution."

"Then what did they bring you here for?"

"I tricked them," Umpax explained in an excited whisper. "I really came from your friends Amos Winkler and Terri Winkler. I'm going to lead all of you to the spaceport and safety."

The Earthman Johnson nearly pounced on Umpax in his eagerness. "Who do you work for?" he cried. "Who sent you? Is there a plan to get us to safety?"

"I work for no one. I have a plan."

"You're alone?" The Earthman Johnson groaned.

"I'm half Earthman," Umpax explained proudly. "That is why I want to help you. In memory of my father, Terrence O'Tool of Dublin."

The Earthman Johnson grinned at him. "Well, it's a cinch I can't help myself, son. What's your plan?"

"Tomorrow, the revolutionary tribunal meets to pass judgment on you. As you Earthmen say, it will be an open and shut case. They'll condemn you to death to show the stellar system they mean business."

"But I haven't done anything."

"It doesn't matter."

"And Earth will be angry. You don't know Earth, son."

"Neither do the Halcrynonian women, I'm afraid. For they're going ahead with it. However—"

"Yes?" said the Earthman Johnson.

"You'll have to trust me. Tomorrow at the tribunal, I want you to shock them by saying you'll agree to marry Lampir."

"What? But—but—"

"I'll explain it to Terri. Terri loves you."

The Earthman Johnson pounded Umpax on the back with a great slab of a hand. These Earthmen were notoriously expressive. "She told you that? She really said she loved me?"

"I heard her with my own ears."

"Hot dog," said the Earthman Johnson. "Go ahead and tell me the rest of it, son."

Huddled together in the small damp cell, the man and

the boy whispered for a few moments, the latter doing most of the talking. When he finished, the man shook his head.

"Can you think of a better plan?" Umpax O'Tool demanded.

"Unfortunately," Jimmy Johnson reminded him, "I haven't even been permitted to contact my friends. But you'll never get away with it, boy. I can't ask you to put your own head in a noose in an attempt to save me."

Umpax O'Tool smiled. He said cockily, "Don't worry about me. Besides, after I rescue you and take you to the spaceport, I'm going to Earth with you. I want to see all the things my father used to tell me about. Is it true Dublin is the biggest city in the whole galaxy?"

The Earthman Johnson cleared his throat uncomfortably and assured Umpax that Dublin was larger than any city on Halcrynon. After that, Umpax raised his voice and called: "Hey, lady! I'm ready to go now."

A moment later, Lampir came down the corridor. "Well, boy," she asked, "do you believe us now?"

Umpax gave her a low bow. "Yes, ma'am," he said in what he hoped was an awed, respectful voice. "To atone for my lack of belief, I would now like to offer my services to the women rulers of Fort Highmount."

Lampir considered this and said, "I don't see why not. I can use a manservant. Most of the other officers have them, but I thought that if Jimmy here agreed to marry me—"

"Perhaps he will," said Umpax mysteriously, but when Lampir turned to look at the Earthman Johnson hopefully, he was gazing out the barred window at the falling snow.

"Come, boy," said Lampir, and led Umpax O'Tool down the corridor and through the gate of the stockade enclosure of the Fort Highmount prison to her quarters.

That night, after he had accompanied Lampir as her manservant to a meeting of Fort Highmount officers and after he had put her uniforms in order when she retired, Umpax O'Tool slipped past the guard-post and trudged the two miles back through the snow toward the little stone-slab house in which Amos Winkler and his granddaughter waited.

He rapped on the door a long time before he got any

answer. It was colder now than it had been in the dark afternoon, although Halcrynon's small blue sun had set at noon in the Halcrynonian winter, so that afternoon was often referred to as night. Umpax's hands and nose were blue with cold. If they did not answer soon, he would have to trudge all the way back to Fort Highmount with no chance to thaw out.

The door opened a crack. Amos Winkler grunted sleepily and admitted Umpax, who beamed on the sleepy old man and said, "Where is Miss Terri?"

"Sleeping, like any sensible person should be doing at this hour. Come in, boy."

While Umpax removed his mackinaw, Winkler replenished the fire, which had burned down to red-glowing embers. Outside, the winter winds of Halcrynon moaned across the frozen tundra, the snowdrifts marching in its van like sand dunes on an Earth desert.

"Is that Umpax O'Tool I hear?" Terri called in a sleepy voice from the second room of the small two-room house.

"I have come with good news," Umpax said, and Terri appeared a moment later in a large quilted robe.

Umpax explained the plan while the Winklers listened in silence. "No!" Terri cried when he finished. "I can't agree to such a thing."

"But don't you see, it won't actually be Lampir who—"

"How do you know?" Terri interrupted him. "How can you be sure?"

"Because I am the son of my father," said Umpax O'Tool. "That is how I know. I am an O'Tool of Dublin, although I have been born and raised here on Halcrynon."

"I still won't—"

"Terri, Terri," scolded Amos Winkler. "The boy's plan is a sensible one. You know what the alternative is. When the revolutionary tribunal tries Jimmy tomorrow they will find him guilty of everything in their book. Terri, they'll execute him. It's very necessary for them to show the world why they're breaking off relations with Earth."

Terri said, "Umpax please tell me what this Lampir person is like."

"Oh, she's a nice lady, and very pretty," Umpax said, winking at Amos Winkler. "She has beautiful blonde hair and a fine figure. . . ." All this was true enough, but Umpax O'Tool could imagine Terri magnifying it in her

mind until Lampir became the stellar system's most gorgeous creature. "But," Umpax concluded, suddenly feeling sorry for Terri, "you are even prettier. And besides, the Earthman Johnson told me he loves you."

Terri gave a little squeal of joy and rushed across the room toward Umpax, who was standing near the fire and warming himself. She said, "Oh, Umpax, I could kiss you." She proved it by throwing her arms around Umpax and planting a big kiss on his lips.

Umpax O'Tool sighed and disengaged himself. "It is very nice to be growing up," he said. He had never known there was such magic in kissing. His head was whirling. Of course the Earthman Johnson was in love with this girl. How could he be anything but in love with her?

"As far as I can gather," Umpax said finally, "you're still safe here. The military authorities at Fort Highmount are going to do nothing about you until after the trial. They're waiting to see your reaction to it, from what I heard. After that, though . . ." Instead of finishing his sentence, Umpax ran the index finger of his right hand across his pale-green throat.

"You mean," said Amos Winkler, "they'll try us for spying, too?"

"Probably. More scapegoats. If they can keep their menfolk worried enough, the women may be able to remain in power. Especially since the men are getting their ears boxed on the slightest provocation."

"I sure wish," Amos Winkler said, "we could stay here peacefully. This topsy-turvy world of yours would make some study, Umpax O'Tool."

"Don't look at me, sir. It's not my world. I'm really more than half Earthman. I can tell. I can feel it, deep inside of me. But right now," Umpax said, climbing into his mackinaw and heading for the door, "I'd better return to Fort Highmount before Lampir misses me."

"Did he really say he loves me?" Terri asked in a dreamy voice.

Umpax assured her the Earthman Johnson had said exactly that, then shook hands with Amos Winkler and walked out into the freezing black night. He thought, if the women of Fort Highmount knew what I was planning for tomorrow, I would-

n't live to see the day after tomorrow. . . .

Lampir stretched languidly until she realized it was quite cold in the room. She shivered and prodded Umpax, who was sleeping on the floor as if he had been there all night although he had only returned a couple of hours ago.

The insistent foot digging into his ribs awakened Umpax O'Tool. He shook himself sleepily, but the foot did not belong to any dream. He stood up quickly. Lampir said, "Hurry, you little oaf! Make the fire so I don't freeze to death. Then fetch my breakfast."

Umpax moved about his task rapidly. Soon he had a big fire blazing on the hearth and watched Lampir getting into her uniform with a complete lack of concern for his presence. She was very pleasant to look at, even for a boy of twelve. I'm a mature twelve, like the boys of Dublin must be, Umpax assured himself. Besides, Terri Winkler was far prettier.

"Oaf! Fetch my breakfast!"

And, Umpax thought wryly, much less arrogant. He decided he did not like Lieutenant Lampir. He would have no regrets about following through with what he had planned for this day.

When he returned to her quarters with Lampir's breakfast, which he had obtained after waiting on line with a fewscore other manservants, most of whom were either very young or very old, the woman was fully dressed and humming to herself. It was a song Umpax recognized, a little love-ditty which had been popular before the women took over Halcrynon. "Starman, starman, come from above, kiss me, kiss me, show your love," the refrain went. Now on Halcrynon it was a forbidden song. Umpax cleared his throat and deposited the breakfast tray on Lampir's desk.

She looked at him with suddenly round eyes, but he said, "I didn't hear anything."

She seemed relieved. She said, "Umpax, do I look happy? I am very happy today."

"I am happy, ma'am, that you are happy."

"Do you know why?"

"No, ma'am."

"You see—" But Lampir's voice trailed off as Umpax O'Tool accidently spilled the citrus juice he was pouring from a plastic container into her glass.

"Clumsy oaf!" she cried,

and boxed his ears thoroughly. Umpax took the stinging blows with a stoic calm which surprised even himself. Almost, he was glad it had happened. For now it would be easier to do what he had to do. And if the result was court martial for the beautiful but cruel Lampir, she deserved it anyway.

Lampir calmed down quickly and went on with what she had been saying as if nothing had happened, "I will tell you why I am happy, boy. I had a dream last night about the Earthman Johnson. In his trial today he said he would agree to marry me if all charges were dropped. Now do you see why I am so happy?"

"Yes, graciousness," Umpax O'Tool said, bowing low. He stood at ease while Lampir ate her breakfast. She left a slice of dry toast and a little milk for him. He said he was not hungry.

"Is it still snowing, boy?" she asked.

"Yes, gracious lady."

"Then fetch my overcloak, please."

Umpax bowed again and walked across the room to Lampir's closet. When he was sure she was not watching him, he took something from his pocket. It was a small phial he had stolen from the Fort Highmount station hospital before retiring last night, and when he uncorked it he became aware of the sickly sweet odor of its contents. He quickly spilled what was in the phial on the lining of Lampir's furred overcloak and returned to her with the garment.

"Drape me, boy," she said indolently, not looking at him but staring out the window at the snow. "The Earthman's trial starts in one hour." Umpax came up behind her slowly, watching as she fastened the veil which obscured her face. Such veils, he knew, were worn at meetings of the revolutionary tribunal to negate the need for secret balloting.

Taking a deep breath, Umpax raised the voluminous overcloak and dropped it not on Lampir's shoulders but over her head. The boy held it there as Lampir struggled and writhed in his grasp. Once she almost got clear of the folds of the cloak and screamed, "Help!" Then Umpax forced the cloak over her face again. The smell of the anesthetic was making him giddy, but he managed to hold the cloak in place until

Lampir's struggles became weaker.

Just as she collapsed to the floor and Umpax began to congratulate himself, the door burst open and the biggest man Umpax O'Tool had ever seen in his life lumbered into the room. In despair, Umpax recognized him. He had been a champion wrestler before men on Halcrynon had banned competitive sport. Now he was manservant to one of the field grade officers at Fort Highmount.

"I heard somebody yelling in here," he said in a booming voice, and then saw Lampir lying crumpled on the floor. His small eyes squinted at Umpax, then he plodded across the room toward the boy.

Umpax grasped the heavy breakfast tray and hurled it. The huge man, whose name, Umpax remembered, was Tojak, brought up his forearm to ward off the tray. The tray shattered against his arm. Umpax leaped over Lampir's bed. When Tojak followed him, the bed collapsed under the wrestler's weight, enmeshing him momentarily in bedclothes.

Umpax snatched the anesthetizing cloak from Lampir's still form and tried to pin Tojak with it, but the giant brushed him away effortlessly and stood up, reeling and dizzy with the powerful anesthetic. He lunged after Umpax, cornered him and swung a fist almost as big as the O'Tool head. Umpax ducked his head and whirled to watch disbelieving as Tojak's great fist broke through the plaster wall of the room.

The giant stood there with his arm in the wall. He pulled it and tugged it but the hole seemed too small for him to withdraw his hand. Umpax ran for the overcloak again, grasped it firmly with both hands, took a running start and leaped on Tojak's great back as the wrestler stood against the wall. Pressing his knees into Tojak's side so he wouldn't fall off, Umpax flung the cloak over the giant's head.

The wall shook dangerously as Tojak tried to get his hand free. A large crack appeared in the plaster. Give the huge man half a minute more, Umpax thought, and the whole wall would come tumbling down. But even as he thought this, Tojak's efforts became weaker. The wall still shook, but not as if some mythological god of lightning was bombarding it with thunderbolts. And Tojak's huge legs were trembling.

Umpax leaped clear of him before he fell to the floor. The room shook. Dust settled. Tojak, all three hundred pounds of him, was sleeping peacefully beside Lampir on the floor.

Quickly, Umpax went to Lampir's closet and took out another uniform. He removed his own threadbare clothing and clumsily dressed in the unfamiliar garments. The tall blonde girl's clothing fit him loosely, he found, which was fortunate, for Umpax had to pad himself in strategic spots with rolled up scarves and things. Finally, he looked at himself in the mirror and shuddered. The uniform looked like Lampir's and after the necessary stuffing job had been accomplished, didn't fit him too badly. But he resembled the blonde girl not in the least. Even his skin was not the proper shade of green. He would never fool anyone. . . .

And then Umpax remembered the veil. All officers wore veils at meetings of the revolutionary tribunal. He went to Lampir's still form and removed the veil from her face. When he attached it over his own and put Lampir's visored cap on his head to hide the flaming red hair, he returned to the mirror and smiled weakly. He looked nondescript enough to pass.

As he went out into the hall and closed the door to Lampir's room behind him, wondering how long the woman soldier and the giant Tojak would remain unconscious, another veiled soldier accosted him in the hall. She was an older woman, Umpax O'Tool could tell. She said, "Have you seen my manservant, Tojak, Lieutenant?"

"No, ma'am," said Umpax at once.

"Are you Lampir, Lieutenant? Your voice is strange, but you came out of Lampir's room."

"Headcold, ma'am," mumbled Umpax. The concentric circles on the woman's epaulets proclaimed her to be a commandant, but she was not Commandant Marslak, for Umpax would recognize that hag's voice at once.

"Well," said the commandant, "I do hope it will be better soon." Her voice suddenly took on a confidential tone. "You know, Lieutenant, we of the Judge Advocate Section have been hoping you would act today."

"Act?" said Umpax noncommittally.

"Yes, Lampir. It would serve that dried up old hag

Marslak right if you offered to marry the Earthman. We have enough votes to decide the issue in your favor, if you want to go ahead with it. I could just see Marslak's toothless face when it happens."

So, thought Umpax quickly, this commandant was Purfal, the Judge Advocate General of Fort Highmount. And Purfal seemed in favor of Lampir marrying the Earthman Johnson. Perhaps, with the luck of the O'Tool about which his father used to tell him, Umpax would be able to carry the thing off.

"But," said Umpax, "wouldn't that be bad for propaganda purposes, Commandant Purfal?"

"Nonsense, child. Nonsense. We can find another scapegoat. It will be worth the extra trouble, just seeing Marslak's face when you make your proposition. Will you?"

"Oh, very definitely, Commandant," said Umpax, and snuffled, remembering that he was supposed to have a cold.

They went outside together, donned their snowshoes at the rack, and clomped up the hill toward the tribunal building. It was snowing softly now, and Halcrynon's winter-pale sun gleamed faintly and without much warmth close to the western horizon. Umpax entered the tribunal building with Commandant Purfal and wondered if he would ever see the light of day or the cold clean snows of Halcrynon again or ever embark in a spaceship for the good green hills of Ireland, about which his father had told him.

Not if Lampir could help it, he wouldn't. He hoped Lampir would remain unconscious.

The trial of the Earthman Johnson had brought every officer in Fort Highmount to the revolutionary tribunal building. They were all women and they were all veiled and Umpax O'Tool felt a gratifying and comforting anonymity as he lost himself among all those uniforms and veils. The sense of anonymity and freedom from danger would vanish, he thought grimly, when it came time for him to speak.

Very swiftly, the trial of the Earthman Johnson moved ahead. He was accused of spying for Earth against Halcrynon. What good said spying would do Earth was never told. How the Earthman Johnson had gone about the alleged act also was never revealed. How he hoped to get whatever information he had

taken to Earth was another fact either withheld, not revealed or—far more likely, Umpax decided—not invented by the prosecuting lawyers.

But nevertheless, a great cheer went up when the prosecutor said, "This infamous act must not go unpunished. This pawn of a wicked Earth must not be given his freedom, to prey on the women of Halcrynon or some other planet again! There is only one action you can take, fellow members of the revolutionary tribunal, and that is to find the Earthman Johnson guilty as charged of spying. The only fitting penalty is death."

Commandant Marslak, seated a dozen rows down from Umpax, signalled she wanted to speak. She said only two words after commending the prosecutor. She said, "Slow death."

The Earthman Johnson's tribunal-appointed defense attorney, a stuttering, nervous young woman with a small voice which could barely carry to the far corners of the big assembly and which was not magnified mechanically in any way, said, "I, t-t-too wish to commend the p-prosecutor for a fine speech, but I feel that the Earthman Johnson should not b-b-be executed unless Earth is f-f-first informed of our intentions c-c-concerning this. Thank you."

After that, the Earthman Johnson stood up roaring. "In all my life," he said, his voice carrying clear across the assembly, "I have never seen such a travesty on justice as this so-called trial of your revolutionary tribunal. I—" Before he could go on, his two guards, huge men each almost as big as giant Tojak himself, wrestled him back into his chair and silenced him there.

Commandant Purfal, glancing hopefully in Umpax O'Tool's direction, said, "If there are no further entries to be made in the record of the revolutionary tribunal this day, I hereby call for a vote on the fate of the Earthman Johnson."

"Slow death," Commandant Marslak croaked again. Although veiled, she was unmistakable by her voice.

All at once, Umpax found himself standing. Commandant Purfal looked in his direction and said, "You may speak, Lieutenant."

Because it was common knowledge that if anyone offered to marry the Earthman, Lampir would, Umpax knew his identity would be assumed even before he spoke.

Therefore, he coughed, hacked, cleared his throat a few times and sneezed thrice to indicate he had a cold. He spoke in a hoarse voice unrecognizable either as his own or as belonging to Lampir. He said, "My feelings for the Earthman Johnson—sneeze! have long been known. I realize that certain of my senior officers—cough, cough!—are opposed to any such plan, but the course of true love, whether on Halcrynon or Earth or elsewhere—sneeze! —excuse me—must be served. I therefore propose to marry the Earthman Johnson and be responsible for all his—sneeze!—actions in the future."

"No!" croaked Commandant Marslak. "I forbid it."

Commandant Purfal said in a loud clear voice, "You can forbid nothing, Commandant Marslak. You forget that half a dozen officers at this meeting hold the same rank you do. You also forget that any decision at the tribunal is reached by voting. I second Lieutenant Lamp—I mean, the lieutenant's motion. I approve of her marriage with the prisoner."

The vote was four hundred and twenty-six approving the marriage, one hundred eighty-seven opposed. "Motion carried," said Commandant Purfal happily. Commandant Marslak hunched her bony shoulders and said nothing. Veiled women officers rushed to Umpax and congratulated him, while Purfal declared that the prisoner would be free, as of this very moment, in the lieutenant's custody.

Then Purfal added, "Come on now, Lampir. We all know who you are. There's no use hiding behind your veil. Why don't you remove your veil and give the happy groom-to-be a great big kiss?"

The Earthman Johnson was thrust in Umpax O'Tool's direction by eager feminine hands. "Oh, no," said Umpax, "I couldn't do anything like that. I have a bad cold."

Everyone laughed, except Marslak. Purfal repeated: "Go ahead and remove your veil, Lampir."

Before Umpax could think of a suitable answer to make, a voice called from the entrance to the tribunal hall: "That won't be necessary at all, ladies."

It was Lampir.

Purfal gasped, "Why, why, it's Lampir! And my manservant Tojak is with her. But who is this woman, then?"

"You see?" croaked Commandant Marslak, rushing on her thin withered legs toward where Umpax and the Earthman Johnson were standing. "It was a trick. I just knew it!"

"But this other woman—" Purfal began, still thoroughly confused.

"That's no woman at all," Lampir assured her, striding angrily into the hall. "That's my manservant, the halfbreed Umpax O'Tool."

One of the women nearby grasped Umpax's veil and removed it. "Lampir is right!" the woman cried. "It's a boy."

Then a sea of women rushed toward them, mouthing imprecations, shaking fists. They were led by Marslak, who was cackling.

The Earthman Johnson smiled grimly at Umpax and said, "I think we better make a break for it while they're still confused."

So saying, he charged down across the rows of assembly seats, now emptied as the women converged on them, with Umpax O'Tool. At the foot of the tiers of benches, the giant Tojak met them, grinning from ear to ear, his great arms outstretched.

The Earthman Johnson hit him with a good right cross and howled as his fist bounced off the enormous jaw. Tojak shook off the blow and lumbered forward, but Umpax tripped him. The giant went sprawling heavily. Then the Earthman Johnson and Umpax O'Tool were sprinting toward the exit.

Most of the women were too stunned to follow them at once, but Lampir brought the Earthman Johnson down with a very unladylike flying tackle and cried, "I don't know what you can see in that pale-skinned Earth trollop!"

The Earthman Johnson rolled over and tried to get up, but Lampir clung grimly to his legs. "I can't fight with a woman," he wailed at Umpax, "even if they do control this planet."

Umpax said, "Don't be a fool. They'll be on us in a moment."

"I can't—"

"Remember Terri. Terri said she loves you."

"But—"

"For Terri and Earth!" Umpax cried, and swatted Lampir across the head with the heavy bound volume of the minutes of the revolutionary tribunal. Lampir howled and rolled off the Earthman Johnson, who stood up, shook himself, and ran for the door with Umpax.

They made it outside, but

Tojak led the screaming mob of women after them. Outside, the hundreds of manservants, one for each of the woman officers of Fort Highmount, were waiting in the snow and cold, stamping their feet and beating their arms across their chests to keep warm.

"You idiots!" the first woman to come outside yelled. "After them! Stop them! They're trying to get away."

"Men!" Umpax roared in a voice which surprised him because it sounded almost like that of a full grown man. "This is your chance. If you let those women recapture the Earthman Johnson, and if Earth hears what has happened, Halcrynon will be devastated by atomic bombardment."

Naturally, that was a lie. If Earth did find out, the usual prolonged series of diplomatic notes would be exchanged, a few economic sanctions would be placed on Halcrynon, but in the end, the event would be forgotten.

This, however, was the excuse the men of Halcrynon needed. As the women emerged from the hall of the tribunal, each one was met by her manservant. It was, spontaneously, a second insurrection on Halcrynon. It would be a bloodless insurrection, Umpax knew, but watching as the men asserted themselves again, he realized with a smile that many of Halcrynon's former rulers might find their posteriors too tender for sitting before the night was over.

With the Earthman Johnson, Umpax found an over-snow groundcar and climbed in. They sped away down the road to the east, where Amos and Terri Winkler were waiting for them.

Hours later, as they rolled across the snows of Halcrynon toward the spaceport and the small space-ferry which would take them to Ordway Planet and the liner for Earth, Umpax O'Tool said, "That's what they needed. As you Earthmen say, a little shot in the arm. This insurrection won't be local, I'll bet. The men of Halcrynon will take over their planet again."

Amos Winkler nodded. "And it's all thanks to you, son. Want to stay and see the fireworks?"

"Oh, no. No, sir. I'm going to Earth with you."

The Earthman Johnson stopped kissing Terri long enough to say, "You bet he is. We wouldn't leave without him. Would we, Terri?"

"No, darling," she said, and let him kiss her again.

"Wait 'til you see the solar system," Amos Winkler predicted. "You'll love it, Umpax O'Tool. Red Mars and tropical Venus and the great cities of North America, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. . . ."

"Oh, no, sir," said Umpax O'Tool. "I want to go to Dublin."

Which, as it turned out, was exactly where he went.

THE END

QUICK CURE

(Concluded from page 67)

complete case to present to them, and you knew he'd never get it as long as the Governor was under your control.

"You told your colleagues you were out in the bush trying to find the pilot plant that was producing azuolamine from the stolen azuronol. You knew where it was—you'd built it.

"I suppose you'd better call in your men," Kendrick went on, turning to the colonel. As the officer went to the door, Kendrick turned back to the shaken doctor. "I explained the whole thing to Tebrin."

The Farn City Police were soon filling the room. They put magnetic cuffs on Edder Leeth and bundled him out to the waiting patrol car.

"You handled that well," said Colonel Tebrin. His manner was polite, but icy. The sting of Kendrick's insults still hurt. "When he turned that stun gun on you, I thought you'd shoot then for what he did to your hand."

The girl said, "We've done a lot of work with prosthetics here. Thanks to azuronol,—we can actually cause nerve tissue to grow into synthetic flesh. As soon as Dr. Dell gets used to the new nerve circuits, he'll be able to work as well as ever."

"Thanks a lot, Doctor."

She shook her head. "I don't want your thanks," she said dully. "What you did was right, I can appreciate that. But he was still my father. I respect you for what you did, but you can't expect me to like you."

"No, I suppose not." He looked at the colonel, then back at the girl. "I can see I've made a lot of friends on Kaibere IV."

Then he turned and headed out toward the waiting patrol car. He had a spaceship to catch.

THE END

ACCORDING TO YOU...

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

A generally good issue this time. I mean August. "The Girl in Tube 14" was good and I'd say that Purcell possesses real imagination. I believe Paul Fairman can do better than "The Smashers," though. His "Beyond the Black Horizons," I'll never forget. *Fantastic*'s best. There's Lesser again. I've got my eye on him. "He Ran All the Way," was neat. Since "The Rusted Jungle," I've got hopes for this author but he's no Hamilton.

The letter section was the best it's been in some time, very interesting. I liked your reply to Ross Weber. It's what I would have said, myself.

I've had my say, present us with better covers now and I won't even mind paying 50 cents for the mag if it should happen to go up.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Alabama

• *For Fairman at his best, read his offering this issue. At times he's so good it scares us! . . . Lesser, too, is with us this time; and Purcell is writing another story for us which we hope will be good enough for acceptance . . . It would take a lot more than "better covers" to pry half a buck per copy from the average reader!*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Seeing the naked girl and the robot on your August cover, I immediately bought your magazine. However, I hasten to add, it was the robot I was interested in.

After your letter section you announced a letter contest. You stated that this did not mean a mere statement of story merits. Well, what do you mean? Don't you want a postcard with five or so entries, or don't you want *any* letter with the complete rating? The last seems correct, since in all of your letters the stories are in random order or in order of appearance. I don't particularly like this one bit. I like to see the person's favorite first, etc. So turning up my nose on the contest I respectfully submit my rating.

"The Girl in Tube 14" was the best by far. Following the school system I would give it a "B." (You may safely conclude I don't think this is a terrific issue.) The second best is "The Smashers," a low "C" story. Same with the third best, "He Ran All the Way." Fourth best (?), given a "D," is "Occupation Force." Last is "Come Tuesday," an "F."

However, getting away from "A"s and "B"s, your editorial was terrific, and your letter column was very, very good as usual. Your same-size-as-story type, single column and good paper, along with your excellent comments, make even an average letter good reading.

Now some comment of mine. Dick Purcell's teen-agers are very different from Archie. It is not necessary to say which are real. That girl on the cover. She looks more like a doll than a human. Either the artist used a doll as a model or a girl with an ample bathing suit on. "The Smashers" and "All the Way," are superman stories. (I just made up this classification. I've only been reading S-F for three years.) However, the authors tried to make them psychological stories. (By the way, I'm sorry for calling the two alien-invasion stories in June *Fantastic* space-operas. I got confused since both are stereotypes from the old, fast-moving school of S-F.)

By the way, I agree with the idea of printing the number of words in a story in the table of contents.

Lawrence Shovlin
11760 Kilbourne
Detroit 13, Michigan

• *What we should have said, in announcing the contest, is this: "For the best letter (and we don't* necessarily *mean a listing of stories in the order of their merit) . . ." Every letter received, regardless of* what *it has to say or how it says it, is considered in arriving at the final selection. Okay? . . . We prefer the "old, fast-moving school of S-F" to the "new, slow-moving school." Why? Because the bulk of our readers do.* —ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I haven't forked over thirty-five cents for Ladies Home Journal since reading my first S-F mag months ago. Seldom did anyway, preferring such as Readers Digest, The Post, and Writer's mags. But I said I never read "that stuff" when S-F or Fantasy stories were being discussed around here, and didn't until I started reading Winston Marks' stories. They surprised me . . . I not only like his stories, but others. Now I go out and buy the mags, as well as read the free ones lying around.

I've read both science fiction and fantasy stories by Winston Marks and here is a writer who makes detail as interesting as action, and many of his stories have something that very few science fiction seem to have . . . humor. Regardless of what kind of frozen, melted, cratered world, inhabited by birds, animals, or creatures of other ingredients than flesh and blood that S-F authors write of, I think a little humor in characters, situation, or action improves them. I realize that laughter and a sense of humor are traits of the human race as we live it and such traits may have no place in S-F, but I like it . . . being such a new reader of S-F and Fantasy, perhaps the space to span between earthly emotions and straight science fiction is too much for me. "Some Tuesday" by Winston Marks (August *Fantastic*) is the interesting and skillfully written kind of story I enjoy. Hope you continue to carry more stories such as "Come Tuesday" and more of Marks' stories. When I see his name on the contents page I buy the mag—regardless of which s-f magazine it is.

I liked the Paul Fairman's "The Smashers" (Aug., *Fantastic*) better than the cover story, "The Girl in Tube 14" . . . even the naked girl seemed like old stuff (having read too many lately about cooking up girls out of this or that and

people disappearing or reappearing by different means). Incidentally, about that "word count business" . . . if the story's good, who cares how long or short it is? Except the author, that is.

Grace Booth Fowler
Rt. 1 Box 332
Talent, Oregon

• *Who says that humor has no place in science fiction? Certainly not us! One of the flaws in too much of today's fiction, science or otherwise, is its stern attention to realism; so much so that the very word "realism" has become synonymous with "grimness." . . . We knew that Mr. Marks was good, but we didn't realize he was* that *good!*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Being only 15 and a newcomer to the dreamland of s-f addicts, I have up to now been leery of writing to any letter department. But I couldn't help writing when I read the May issue of your mag. I always thought that s-f pulps were written by miserly little men that counted their hoard by the light of a candle and cared only for the readers' 35 cents. *Fantastic* is worthy of the name science fiction.

Mike Bennett
303 Whithead St.
Key West, Florida

• *Writers, Mike, are spendthrift six-footers who count their hundred-dollar bills by the light of the sun in twenty-room villas on the French Riviera. Or so we're told.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Contrary to your list of qualifications of an able writer, commendably outlined on p. 129, Aug. issue, you do let mediocre stuff slip in.

Perhaps you be on the horns of a dilemma, between too obtuse scientific and historic material of a limited market value, and crass oversimplifications, as exemplified by your cover story.

A reliable old-timer, say like Sprague de Camp, would have digested an extensive bibliography on "invisibility," modern

science on vibratory effects in the higher octaves, more than an inkling on astral projections, and all about the ancient experiments of Apollonius of Tyana. Result: a competent, profound story, perchance a bit top-heavy.

What did you select? An ebullient author conversant with nothing, a story of meager substance, no plausibility, an illogical ending, conveniently obliterating all traces of the naive hodge-podge.

You have my sympathy, uneven quality and all. It takes delicate maneuvering to make a magazine survive and grow. This I must see. Forever.

Ernest M. Smola
35 E. 36th St.
New York 16, N. Y.

• *Reader Smola is advised that there are no horns on us. When it comes to deciding between "obtuse scientific . . . material of a limited market" and "crass oversimplification" —your editor prefers the latter—as do most readers. Nobody wants to fight a story to enjoy it, and simplicity makes for ready understanding, and ready understanding makes for enjoyment in reading . . . Webster defines "ebullient" as: "Boiling up or causing such action; hence, manifesting exhilaration or excitement, as of feeling; effervescent." Which is exactly what we want, both in authors and their best type of effervescent stories.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

One of my favorite hobbies is science-fiction, and one day while I was roving around the bookstore, my hand happened to come in contact with an issue of *Fantastic*. I am happy to say that it will be more directed next time.

I was interested to read that you order your covers and then have stories written around them. No kidding! Perhaps I am proclaiming my ignorance but this is the first time I've heard of such a thing. I always thought it was the other way around. Not that I'm against it, of course. I practice art and have attempted writing and know that a capable artist has ingenuity and an excellent imagination (not only in science-fiction) and thus should not be restricted by the writer. Naturally the artist will put out a better piece of work if he

doesn't have to watch his every move. At the same time the author has an interesting idea for a story. Every author has to have an idea to begin with (there you have an extreme example of my practical reasoning) so what could be better than a detailed illustration.

After all, someone once told me there were only 39 possible plots (by the way, could you possibly verify this), and I suppose any of them could have been used with that pretty gal in the tube.

Which reminds me,—do you realize the girl on the cover and the one inside are *not the same girl!!!* I refer to a certain little birthmark; hair length; and the fact that the one on the cover is only 2′ with a 34″ bust . . . etc., whereas the one inside is 5′5½ tall with a 37″ . . . also etc. (I could claim I do it by Mathematics but actually it's a gift) it really doesn't matter though, they're both cute.

A very good cover, I would say excellent but then you would think I was completely satisfied and I must admit I am a very critical fellow.

Speaking about plots awhile ago, I'll just betcha Dick Purcell didn't even have one in mind until he got to page 38. (ended on page 39), but that's all right too, once in a while. Free and easy. Personally I would have liked it better if he'd left the plot (page 39) out.

That word on page 57—last word of the second line in the first column is a disgusting thing . . . always has been.

I could probably write a few pages about every one of yours, but there are many other people who can waste your time just as aptly as I can, so . . .

Bill Pearson
4516 E. Glenrosa Ave.
Phoenix, Arizona

• *Okay; a) Usually the covers come first, then the story. But not always; b) the number of possible (basic) plots run anywhere from seven to thirty-six, depending on the authority you wish to quote; c) "gift" nothing; you're a genius! d) we don't know whether Purcell plotted the story as he went along or had it all worked out before hand; either way it rang the tocsin with us! e) sorry that word slipped in.* —ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have just finished reading the June issue of *Fantastic* and here is my letter. I would like to see more stories like the "Killer Within" and "Beyond the Black Horizon" in coming issues. Also how about using more cover girls? There are only a few girls who object and they are just jealous that it is not their picture.

I would like to write to anyone who is interested in S-F, Science, Radio, or Photography. I almost forgot to say that I would like to see some stories that have something to do with radio.

I see that I am not the only one who reads S-F and likes radio too; if that WGHLO after Rose's name means what I think it does.

Gene Benefield
319 - 3rd St. S E
Puyallup, Wash.

• *So that's why the distaff side of our audience objects to cover girls! Now we know!*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Being an art teacher (and a S-F fan) I have always been intrigued by your colorful and dramatic cover illustrations. Am particularly intrigued as to how one could win a duplicate of one of the originals offered in your August issue in case of ties. I am probably jumping the gun with this snide observation as nothing seems impossible in S-F.

Howard Smith Jr.
Box 316
Green River, Wyoming

• *Come to think of it, the wording of the contest rules was a bit ambiguous. Actually, we did not mean to convey that original cover paintings would be awarded; it was the interior art we were talking about. And, in case of ties, each winner would receive an original illustration used in* Fantastic. —ED.

Dear Editor:

Your request for letters, prompts this one. Having never written to an editor, I don't exactly know how to express myself, but here goes.

I'm certainly glad *Fantastic* is back to science-fiction. I had given it up, but don't worry I'm back to stay. I have never missed an issue of your mag, and don't expect to. I think both your books are great and your covers are outstanding.

I have been reading science-fiction for many years. In the last few years when so many new mags hit the stands, I finally had to decide to read only the best, your two publications are on the top of my list; it's up to you to keep them there.

Thank you for giving a housewife so much enjoyment in her spare time.

Mrs. Philip Leonhart, Jr.
357 Summit Ave.
Steubenville, Ohio

• *Thank you for writing to us, Mrs. Leonhart. We'll do our best to "keep them there."* —ED.

Dear Editor:

I consider myself somewhat of an authority on S-F, the reason for that being that I have been reading the stuff for almost 6 years. In fact when I was in Billings, Montana, I was made Science-Fiction Editor of the school paper, and the magazine too! What I am trying to say is that the teachers are finally beginning to realize that S-F is here to stay. That is, it will be Science-*Fiction* until it becomes Science-*Adventure*.

Well anyway, yesterday I picked up your magazine for the first time, and I will say to the editor of any S-F pulp-mag that you have the greatest, the most, in short, where have you been all my life? But, I still have some complaints to make. The first one being that, although I thought "The Girl in Tube 14" was excellent, you should have some of the more conventional S-F stories. You know. Space travel, time machine, and the like. My second is that I think you should have more covers with pretty girls, without much on of course, being chased by BEMs.

But regardless of what anyone says I think you have an excellent magazine. Keep up the good work.

Jerry Callaway
802 Gerrans
Cody, Wyoming

• *A lot of well-meaning people would yell bloody murder if we* dared *to use "a pretty (unclad) girl being chased by a BEM." They'd point out that male BEM's wouldn't be caught dead chasing anything except a female BEM. And, you know, they'd be right! However, there'll be space travel and time machines in issues to come, so they won't be a total waste for you.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

Concerning Mr. Willoughby's letter on p. 120 of the August *Fantastic.*

It seems to me that Mr. Willoughby has a good idea about that story he wrote about, namely "The Man From Yesterday"-Aug. 1948 FA. The story was an outstanding one—the moment I read the title I remembered it, even after 7 years.

Anybody who writes that good material, Mr. Browne, shouldn't be allowed to stop—as you say you have.

You are right, though, sequels should be kept out. But couldn't a shorter story, suitable for Fantastic, be built around Avar?

Your magazine rates with the best. Keep up the good work.

John W. Burgeson
Physics Dept.
Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida

• *Avar was a nice guy who came up against modern "civilization"—and it killed him. That, you see, was the premise of "The Man From Yesterday": Man, in his basic values, has retrogressed, not advanced, since he first walked the Earth. Like any premise, it can be argued pro and con. Now, to dig this Cro-Magnon man up again would only serve to dilute the impact of the novel's ending. Or so it seems to us.*—ED.

WANT SOMETHING FOR YOUR WALL?

For the best letter we use in each issue of *Fantastic,* the editors will send, suitably matted, an original illustration. Decision of the judges is final. Duplicate prizes in case of a tie. —ED.

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID

(Concluded from page 4)

The story which I am about to relate, Gentle Reader, began on a far-flung planet somewhere in . . .

"I love you," he pleaded.
"I don't believe you," she scoffed.
"But I do love you," he reiterated.
"Prove it," she challenged.
"How could I?" he questioned.
"Surely you can think of something," she goaded . . .

Mars, as everyone knows, is a planet in the Solar System. It is the fourth in order from the sun, or the next beyond the Earth. It has a diameter of roughly 4,200 miles, is red in color, and has . . .

As the savage beast, all twelve legs pounding the turf, charged toward them, Captain Hansome turned to his lieutenant, "I'm afraid this is it, Quimby. Little will Earth know that we died in its service, brave and fearless to the very end . . ."

I awoke suddenly as from a dream. In the soft rays of the moon through the French windows a vague shimmering form seemed to float grotesquely above the foot of the bed. A voice, as from the sepulchre, began to speak. "I am the ghost of your beloved grandmother. I have come to warn you of impending doom . . ."

The bartender of the Venusian cafe leaned toward me over the bar. "See that guy in the Space Patrol Captain's uniform?" he whispered, his tone conspiratorial. "The one with the crippled arm? Let me tell you a story about him . . ."

Since I've been a reader of science-fiction from the time I was eight, I wasn't surprised when this flying saucer . . .

—HB.

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—continued from Back Cover

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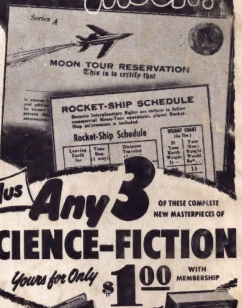

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BLACK BLOCKADE by Paul W. Fairman